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"Drag" Harlan

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She laid her head on his shoulder, sobbing, and talking incoherently.

[Page 65]

"DRAG" HARLAN

BY

CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER

AUTHOR OF

THE BOSS OF THE LAZY Y,
"FIREBRAND" TREVISON,
THE TRAIL HORDE,
THE RANCHMAN, ETC.

FRONTISPIECE BY

P. V. E. IVORY

GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

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1921

Published May, 1921

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1600666

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"DRAG" HARLAN

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CHAPTER I

A DESERT RIDER

FROM out of the shimmering haze that veiled the mystic eastern space came a big black horse bearing a rider. Swinging wide, to avoid the feathery dust that lay at the base of a huge sand dune, the black horse loped, making no sound, and seeming to glide forward without effort. Like a somber, gigantic ghost the animal moved, heroic of mold, embodying the spirit of the country, seeming to bear the sinister message of the desert, the whispered promise of death, the lingering threat, the grim mockery of life, and the conviction of futility.

The black horse had come far. The glossy coat of him was thickly sprinkled with alkali dust, sifted upon him by the wind of his passage through the desert; his black muzzle was gray with it; ropes of it matted his mane, his forelock had become a gray-tinged wisp which he fretfully tossed; the dust had rimmed his eyes, causing them to loom large and wild; and as his rider pulled him to a halt on the western side of the sand dune — where both horse and rider would not be visible on the sky line — he drew a deep breath, shook his head vigorously, and blew a thin stream of dust from his nostrils.

With head and ears erect, his eyes flaming his undying courage and his contempt for distance and the burning heat that the midday sun poured upon him, he gazed westward, snorting long breaths into his eager lungs.

The rider sat motionless upon him — rigid and alert. His gaze also went into the west; and he blinked against the white glare of sun and distance, squinting his eyes and scanning the featureless waste with appraising glances.

In the breathless, dead calm of the desert there was no sound or movement. On all sides the vast gray waste stretched, a yawning inferno of dead, dry sand overhung with a brassy, cloudless sky in which swam the huge ball of molten silver that for ages had ruled that baked and shriveled land.

A score of miles westward — twoscore, perhaps — the shadowy peaks of some mountains loomed upward into the mystic haze, with purple bases melting into the horizon; southward were other mountains, equally distant and mysterious; northward — so far away that they blurred in the vision — were still other mountains. Intervening on all sides was the stretching, soundless, aching void of desolation, carrying to the rider its lurking threat of death, the promise of evil to come.

The man, however, seemed unperturbed. In his narrowed, squinting eyes as he watched the desert was a gleam of comprehension, of knowledge intimate and sympathetic. They glowed with the serene calm of confidence; and far back in them lurked a glint of grim mockery. It was as though they visualized the threat-

ened dangers upon which they looked, answering the threat with contempt.

The man was tall. His slim waist was girded by a cartridge belt which was studded with leaden missiles for the rifle that reposed in the saddle holster, and for the two heavy pistols that sagged at his hips. A gray woolen shirt adorned his broad shoulders; a scarlet neckerchief at his throat which had covered his mouth as he rode was now drooping on his chest; and the big, wide-brimmed felt hat he wore was jammed far down over his forehead. The well-worn leather chaps that covered his legs could not conceal their sinewy strength, nor could the gauntleted leather gloves on his hands hide the capable size of them.

He was a fixture of this great waste of world in whose center he sat. He belonged to the country; he was as much a part of it as the somber mountains, the sun-baked sand, the dead lava, and the hardy, evil-looking cacti growth that raised its spined and mocking green above the arid stretch. He symbolized the spirit of the country — from the slicker that bulged at the cantle of the saddle behind him, to the capable gloved hands that were now resting on the pommel of the saddle — he represented the force which was destined to conquer the waste places.

For two days he had been fighting the desert; and in the serene calm of his eyes was the identical indomitability that had been in them when he had set forth. As he peered westward the strong lines around his mouth relaxed, his lips opened a trifle, and a mirthless smile wreathed them. He patted the shoulder of the

black horse, and the dead dust ballooned from the animal's coat and floated heavily downward.

"We're about halfway, Purgatory," he said aloud, his voice coming flat and expressionless in the dead, vacuum-like silence. He did not cease to peer westward nor to throw sharp glances north and south. He drew off a glove and pushed his hat back, using a pocket handkerchief to brush the dust from his face and running the fingers of the hand through his hair—thereby producing another ballooning dust cloud which splayed heavily downward.

"What's botherin' me is that shootin'," he went on, still speaking to the black horse. "We sure enough heard it—didn't we?" He laughed, again patting the black's shoulder. "An' you heard it first—as usual—with me trailin' along about half a second behind. But we sure heard 'em, eh?"

The black horse whinnied lowly, whereupon the rider dismounted, and stretched himself.

From a water-bag at the cantle of the saddle he poured water into his hig hat, watching sympathetically while the big horse drank. Some few drops that still remained in the hat after the horse had finished he playfully shook on the animal's head, smiling widely at the whinny of delight that greeted the action. He merely wet his own lips from the water-bag. Then for an instant, after replacing the bag, he stood at the black's shoulder, his face serious.

"We'll hit the Kelso water-hole about sundown, I reckon, Purgatory," he said. "That's certain. There's only one thing can stop us—that shootin'. If it's

paches, why, I reckon there's a long dry spell ahead
us; but if it's only Greasers——"

He grinned with grim eloquence, patted the black
gain, and climbed into the saddle. Again, as before,
sat silent upon his mount, scanning the sun-scorched
aste; and then he rode forward.

An hour later, during which he loped the black horse
owly, he again drew the animal to a halt and gazed
ound him, frowning, his eyes gleaming with a savage
tolerance.

The shooting he had heard some time previous to
s appearance at the base of the big sand dune had
t been done by Indians. He was almost convinced
that now. Or, if Indians had done the shooting,
ey had not yet observed him. The fact that he had
en no smoke signals proved that.

Still, there was the deep silence on every hand to
ing doubt into his mind; and he knew that Indians—
pecially Apaches—were tricky, sometimes foregoing
e smoke signals to lie in ambush. And very likely—
they had seen him coming—they were doing that
ry thing: waiting for him to ride into the trap they
d prepared. He had not been able to locate the
int from which the reports had come. It had seemed
him that they had come from a point directly west-
ard; but he could not be sure, for he had seen no
noke.

He talked no more to the horse, sitting rigidly in
e saddle, erect, his head bent a little forward, his
in thrusting, his lips curving with a bitterly savage
arl. He felt the presence of living things with him

in the desert; a presentiment had gripped him — a conviction that living men were close and hostile.

Reaching downward, he drew the rifle from the saddle holster and examined its mechanism. Placing it across his knee, he drew out his heavy pistols, one after another, slowly twirling the cylinders. He replaced the pistols, making sure that the holster flaps were out of the way so that they would not catch or drag at the weapons when he wanted to use them — and with the rifle resting across his legs near the saddle horn, he rode slowly forward.

He swung wide of even the small sand dunes as he passed them, and he kept a vigilant eye upon the dead rocks that dotted the level at infrequent intervals. Even the cactus clumps received flattering attention; and the little stretches of greasewood that came within range of his vision were examined closely.

At the end of half an hour he had seen nothing unusual. Here and there he had noticed a rattler lurking in the shade of a rock or partly concealed under the thorny blade of a sprawling cactus; and he had seen a sage hen nestling in the hot sand. But these were fixtures — as was also the Mexican eagle that winged its slow way in mile-wide circles in the glaring, heat-pulsing sky.

The rider again halted the black horse. The presentiment of evil had grown upon him, and he twisted around in the saddle, sweeping the desolate vast level with cold, alert, puzzled eyes.

There was no object near him behind which an enemy might lie concealed; the gray floor of the desert

within many hundred miles of him was smooth and flat and obstructionless. Far away, half a mile, perhaps, he saw a thrusting knob of rock, with some cactus fringing it. From where he sat in the saddle it seemed that the rock might be the peak of a mountain reaching upward out of the sea of sand and desert waste—but it was barren on sides and top, and would afford no concealment for an enemy, except at its base. And even the base was not large enough to conceal more than a few men.

The rider gazed long at the rock, but could detect no sign of movement near it. He had turned from it, to look again into the western distance, when Purgatory whinnied lowly.

Flashing around in the saddle, the rider again faced the rock. And he saw movement there now. The distance was great, but the clarity of the atmosphere brought a moving object distinctly into his vision. The object was a man, and, like a huge fly, he was crawling rapidly up the sloping side of the rock, toward its peak, which flattened abruptly at the summit.

The man bore a rifle. The rider could see it dragging from the man's hand; and in a flash the rider was out of the saddle, throwing himself flat behind a low ridge of sand, his own rifle coming to a rest on a small boulder as he trained its muzzle upon the man, who by this time had reached the summit of the rocks in the distance. The rider waited, nursing the stock of the rifle, his eyes blazing, while Purgatory, seemingly aware of an impending tragedy, moved slowly away as though understanding that he must not expose himself.

The rider waited, anticipating the bullet that would presently whine toward him. And then he heard the report of the man's rifle, saw that the smoke streak had been directed downward, as though the man on the summit of the rock were shooting at something below him.

The rider had been pressing the trigger of his own weapon when he saw the smoke streak. He withheld his fire when he divined that the man was not shooting at him; and when he saw the man on the rock shoot again — downward once more — the rider frowned with embarrassment.

"Don't even know I'm here!" he mused. "An' me gettin' ready to salivate him!"

He got to his knees and watched, curiosity gleaming in his eyes. He saw the man on the rock fire again — downward — and he noted a smoke spurt answer the shot, coming upward from the base of the rock. The rider got to his feet and peered intently at the rock. And now he saw another man crouching near its base. This man, however, was not the one the man on the summit of the rock was shooting at, for smoke streaks were issuing from a weapon in that man's hand also, but they were horizontal streaks.

Therefore the rider divined that the two men must be shooting at another who was on the far side of the rock; and he ran to Purgatory, speaking no word until he had vaulted into the saddle. Then he spoke shortly.

"They're white men, Purgatory, an' they're havin' a private rukus, looks like. But we're doin' some investigatin' just to see if the game's on the level."

CHAPTER II

A MAN'S REPUTATION

PURGATORY moved fast, but warily. The black horse seemed to have caught something of his rider's caution. For part of the distance toward the rock the animal traveled straight, loping rapidly, but as he neared the little stretch of broken country that surrounded the rock he began to sheer off, advancing with mincing steps, his ears erect, his eyes wide and alert, snorting suspiciously.

Knowing his horse, the rider made no attempt to guide him; he knew Purgatory was alert to any hostile movement on the part of the men who were shooting, and that at the first sign of danger to himself or to his rider he would do what was required of him.

The man on the summit of the rock was still shooting, though intermittently. It seemed to the rider that the man's target must be elusive or concealed, for the shooter's actions showed that he was irritated. The other man, too, was still shooting. The rider noted that he, too, seemed to be meeting with failure, for as the rider drew nearer he heard the man curse.

Neither of the two men who were visible to the rider had seen him — neither of them had heard the big black horse gliding over the deep sand of the desert. The rider grinned with grim mirthlessness, edging Purgatory around so that the two men, their backs toward

him, were not more than twenty or thirty feet away and entirely exposed to his view.

So intent were they upon their work that they did not even hear the rider's low laugh as he brought the big black horse to a halt and sat quietly in the saddle, a heavy pistol in each hand, watching them.

The rock, the rider noted, was a huge granite block, rotted from long exposure to the elements, seamed and scarred and cracked. The action of the eternally moving sand had worn an irregular-shaped concave into its southern wall, so that the summit overhung the side. The man on the summit was lying flat on his stomach, leaning far over, still shooting downward. The other man, who was standing at the base, was flattened against it, facing the concave side, shooting occasionally, and cursing volubly.

The rider was curious. Glancing sidelong, southward, he saw two horses not more than a hundred yards away. They were in a depression, behind a sand ridge, which accounted for the fact that the rider had not seen them before.

Sight of the horses brought a widening grin to the rider's face. He had thought, at first, that the two men were shooting at another man, concealed behind the rock; but the fact that there were only two horses indicated that he had been in error. No man would be foolhardy enough to attempt to cross the desert on foot, and unless a man were a friend he would not be carried upon another man's horse. Therefore, it seemed to be evident that the target at which the men were shooting was not another man.

And now, convinced that the men had cornered an animal of some kind, and that they feared it too greatly to face it openly, the rider laughed loudly and called to the men, his voice freighted with sarcasm.

"Scared?" he said. "Oh, don't be. If you'll back off a little an' give him room, he'll just naturally slope, an' give you a chance to get to your cayuses."

Both men wheeled almost at the same instant. The man at the base of the rock snarled—after the first gasp of astonishment, baring his teeth in hideous mirth and embarrassment; the other man, startled and caught off balance at the sound of the rider's voice, slipped, tried to catch himself, failed, and tumbled awkwardly down, scrambling and cursing, to the sand within a few feet of the rider.

Sitting in the sand at the base of the rock, the man who had fallen also snarled as he sat, looking at the rider.

Neither of the two men moved after the involuntary muscular action that had resulted from their astonishment. The man at the base of the rock stood in the position in which he had found himself when he had wheeled.

The pistol in his right hand was held close to his side, the muzzle directed at the rider.

But a change was coming over the man's face. The color was slowly going out of it, the lips were loosening as his jaws dropped, his body began to sag, and his eyes began to widen with fear, stark and naked. At length, the rider now watching him with a gaze in which there began to glow recognition and contempt,

the man dropped his hands to his sides and leaned against the rock.

"'Drag' Harlan!" he muttered hoarsely.

The rider watched, his eyes glittering coldly, his lips twisting in a crooked sneer. Amusement was his dominating emotion, but there was hate in his gaze, mingling with a malignant joy and triumph. The pistols in his hands became steady as his wrist muscles stiffened; and he watched the two men warily, apparently looking straight at the standing man, but seeing the sitting man also.

And now a silence fell—a strained, premonitory silence that had in it a hint of imminent tragedy. The sitting man stiffened, divining the promise of violence; the standing man shrank back a little and looked downward at the pistol in his right hand.

The rider saw the glance and laughed lowly.

"Keep her right where she is, Dolver," he warned. "You lift her one little wee lift, an' I bore you plumb in the brain-box. Sort of flabbergasted, eh? Didn't expect to run into me again so soon?"

He laughed as the other cringed, his face dead white, his eyes fixed on the rider with a sort of dread fascination.

"Dolver, didn't you know when you got my little partner, Davey Langan, that I'd be comin' for you?" said the rider in a slow, drawling whisper. "In the back you got him, not givin' him a chance. You're gettin' yours now. I'm givin' you a chance to take it like a man—standin', with your face to me. Lift her now—damn you!"

There was no change in his expression as he watched the man he had called Dolver. There came no change in the cold, steady gleam of his eyes as he saw the man stiffen and swing the muzzle of his pistol upward with a quick, jerky motion. But he sneered as with the movement he sent a bullet into the man's chest; his lips curving with slight irony when Dolver's gun went off, the bullet throwing up sand at Purgatory's forehoofs.

His eyes grew hard as he saw Dolver stagger, drop his pistol, and clutch at his chest; and he watched with seeming indifference as the man slowly sank to his knees and stretched out, face down, in the dust at the base of the rock.

His lips were stiff with bitter rage, however, as he faced the other man, who had not moved.

"Get up on your hind legs, you yellow coyote!" he commanded.

For an instant it seemed that the other man was to share the fate of the first. The man seemed to think so, too, for he got up trembling, his hands outstretched along the rock, the fingers outspread and twitching from the paralysis of fear that had seized him.

"Shoot your gab off quick!" commanded the rider. "Who are you?"

"I'm Laskar," the man muttered.

"Where you from?"

"Lamo."

The rider's eyes quickened. "Where did you meet up with that scum?" He indicated Dolver.

"In town."

"Lamo?"

The man nodded.

"How long ago?" asked the rider.

"'Bout a week."

The man's voice was hoarse; he seemed reluctant to talk more, and he cast furtive, dreading glances toward the base of the rock where Dolver had stood before the rider had surprised the men.

Watching the man narrowly, the rider noted his nervous glance, and his shrinking, dreading manner. Harlan's eyes gleamed with suspicion, and in a flash he was off the black and standing before Laskar, forbidding and menacing.

"Take off your gun-belt an' chuck it under my horse!" he directed sharply. "There's somethin' goin' on here that ain't been mentioned. I'm findin' out what it is."

He watched while the man unbuckled his cartridge belt and threw it—the pistol still in the holster—into the sand at Purgatory's hoofs. Then he stepped to the man, sheathed one of his pistols, and ran the free hand over the other's clothing in search of other weapons. Finding none, he stooped and took up Dolver's pistol and rifle that had fallen from the man's hands when he had tumbled off the rock, throwing them near where the cartridge belt had fallen.

"You freeze there while I take a look around this rock!" he commanded, with a cold look at the man.

Half a dozen steps took him around the base of the rock. He went boldly, though his muscles were tensed and his eyes alert for surprises. But he had not taken

a dozen steps in all when he halted and stiffened, his lips setting into straight, hard lines.

For, stretched out on his left side in the sand close to the base of the rock—under the flattened summit which had afforded him protection from the bullets the man with the rifle had been sending at him—was a man.

The man was apparently about fifty, with a seamed, pain-lined face. His beard was stained with dust, his hair was gray with it; his clothing looked as though he had been dragged through it. He was hatless, and one of his boots was off. The foot had been bandaged with a handkerchief, and through the handkerchief the dark stains of a wound appeared.

The man's shirt was open in front; and the rider saw that another wound gaped in his chest, near the heart. The man had evidently made some attempt to care for that wound, too, for a piece of cloth from his shirt had been cut away, to permit him to get at the wound easily.

The man's left side seemed to be helpless, for the arm was twisted queerly, the palm of the hand turned limply upward; but when the rider came upon him the man was trying to tuck a folded paper into one of the cylinders of a pistol.

He had laid the weapon in the sand, and with his right hand was working with the cylinder and the paper. When he saw the rider he sneered and ceased working with the pistol, looking up into the rider's face, his eyes glowing with defiance.

"No chance for that even, eh?" he said, glancing

at the paper and the pistol. "Things is goin' plumb wrong!"

He sagged back, resting his weight on the right elbow, and looked steadily at the rider—the look of a wounded animal defying his pursuers.

"Get goin'!" he jeered. "Do your damnedest! I heard that sneak, Dolver, yappin' to you. You're 'Drag' Harlan—gun-fighter, outlaw, killer! I've heard of you," he went on as he saw Harlan scowl and stiffen. "Your reputation has got all over. I reckon you're in the game to salivate me."

Harlan sheathed his gun.

"You're talkin' extravagant, mister man." And now he permitted a cold smile to wreathe his lips. "If it'll do you any good to know," he added, "I've just put Dolver out of business."

"I heard that, too," declared the man, laughing bitterly. "I heard you tellin' Dolver. He killed your partner—or somethin'. That's personal, an' I ain't interested. Get goin'—the sooner the better. If you'd hand it to me right now, I'd be much obliged to you; for I'm goin' fast. This hole in my chest—which I got last night while I was sleepin'—will do the business without any help from you."

After a pause for breath, the man began to speak again, railing at his would-be murderers. He was talking ramblingly when there came a sound from the opposite side of the rock—a grunt, a curse, and, almost instantly, a shriek.

The wounded man raised himself and threw a glance of startled inquiry at Harlan: "What's that?"

Harlan watched the man steadily.

"I reckon that'll be that man Laskar," he said ɔwly. "I lifted his gun an' his rifle, an' Dolver's n, an' throwed them under Purgatory—my horse. ıskar has tried to get them, an' Purgatory's raised me objection."

He stepped back and peered around the rock. ıskar was lying in the sand near the base of the ck, doubled up and groaning loudly, while Purga- ry, his nostrils distended, his eyes ablaze, was stand- g over the weapons that lay in the sand, watching e groaning man malignantly.

Harlan returned to the wounded man, to find that had collapsed and was breathing heavily.

For some minutes Harlan stood, looking down at n; then he knelt in the sand beside him and lifted s head. The man's eyes were closed, and Harlan d his head down again and examined the wound in s chest.

He shook his head as he got up, went to Purgatory, d got some water, which he used to wipe away the st and blood which had become matted over the ɔund. He shook his head again after bathing the ɔund. The wound meant death for the man within short time. Yet Harlan forced some water into the lf-open mouth and bathed the man's face with it.

For a long time after Harlan ceased to work with n the man lay in a stupor-like silence, limp and ɔtionless, though his eyes opened occasionally, and the light in them Harlan knew the man was aware what he had been doing.

The sun was going now; it had become a golden, blazing ball which was sinking over the peaks of some distant mountains, its fiery rays stabbing the pale azure of the sky with brilliantly glowing shafts that threw off ever-changing seas of color that blended together in perfect harmony.

Harlan alternately watched the wounded man and Laskar.

Laskar was still groaning, and finally Harlan walked to him and pushed him with a contemptuous foot.

"Get up, you sneak!" he ordered. And Laskar, groaning, holding his chest—where Purgatory's hoofs had struck him—staggered to his feet and looked with piteously pleading eyes at the big man who stood near him, unmoved by the spectacle of suffering he presented.

And when he found that Harlan gave him no sympathy, he cursed horribly. This drew a cold threat from Harlan.

"Shut your rank mouth or I'll turn Purgatory loose on you—again. Lookin' for sympathy, eh? How much sympathy did you give that hombre who's cashin' in behind the rocks? None—damn you!"

It was the first flash of feeling Harlan had exhibited, and Laskar shrank from him in terror.

But Harlan followed him, grasping him by a shoulder and gripping it with iron fingers, so that Laskar screamed with pain.

"Who is that man?" Harlan motioned toward the rock.

"Lane Morgan. He owns the Rancho Seco—about forty miles south of Lamo," returned Laskar after a long look into Harlan's eyes.

"Who set you guys onto him—what you wantin' him for?"

"I don't know," whined Laskar. "Day before yesterday Dolver an' me meets up in Lamo, an' Dolver asks me to help him give Morgan his pass-out checks on the ride over to Pardo—which Morgan's intendin' to make. I ain't got any love for Morgan, an' so I took Dolver up."

"You're a liar!"

Harlan's fingers were sinking into Laskar's shoulder again, and once more the man screamed with pain and impotent fury.

"I swear—" began Laskar.

Harlan's grin was bitterly contemptuous. He placed the other hand on Laskar's shoulder and forced the man to look into his eyes.

"You're a liar, but I'm lettin' you off. You're a sneak with Greaser blood in you. I don't ever want to see you again. I'm goin' to Lamo—soon as this man Morgan cashes in. I'll be there some time tomorrow. Lamo wouldn't please me none if I was to find you there when I ride in. You slope, now—an' keep on hittin' the breeze until there ain't no more of it. I'd blow you apart if this man Morgan was anything to me. But it ain't my game unless I see you again."

He watched until Laskar, still holding his chest, walked to where the two horses were concealed, and mounted one of them. When Laskar, leaning over

the pommel of the saddle, had grown dim in the haze that was settling over the desert, Harlan scowled and returned to the wounded man.

To his astonishment, Morgan was conscious — and a cold calmness seemed to have come over him. His eyes were filled with a light that told of complete knowledge and resignation. He half smiled as Harlan knelt beside him.

"I'm about due, I reckon," he said. "I heard you talkin' to the man you just let get away. It don't make any difference — about *him*. I reckon he was just a tool, anyway. There's someone behind this bigger than Dolver an' that man Laskar. He didn't tell you?"

Harlan shook his head negatively, watching the other intently.

"I didn't reckon he would," said Morgan. "But there's *somebody*." He gazed long into Harlan's face and the latter gazed steadily back at him. He seemed to be searching Harlan's face for signs of character.

Harlan stood the probing glance well — so that at last Morgan smiled, saying slowly: "It's funny — damned funny. About faces, I mean. Your reputation — it's bad. I've been hearin' about you for a couple of years now. An' I've been lookin' at you an' tryin' to make myself say, 'Yes, he's the kind of guy which would do the things they say he's done.'

"I can't make myself say it; I can't even make myself think it. Either you're a mighty good actor, or you're the worst-judged man I ever met. Which is it?"

"Mostly all of us get reputations we don't de-
ve," said Harlan lowly.

Morgan's eyes gleamed with satisfaction. "Mean-
that you don't deserve yours?" he said.

"I reckon there's been a heap of lyin' goin' on about
."

For a long time Morgan watched the other, study-
him. The long twilight of the desert descended
d found them — Morgan staring at Harlan; the lat-
enduring the gaze — for he knew that the end
uld not long be delayed.

At last Morgan sighed.

"Well," he said, "I've got to take a chance on you.
', somehow, it seems to me that I ain't takin' much
a chance, either. For a man that's supposed to be
hell-raisin' outlaw that folks say you are, you've
t the straightest eyes I ever seen. I've seen killers
an' outlaws, an' gun-fighters, an' I never seen one
at could look at a man like you've looked at me.
arlan," he went on slowly, "I'm goin' to tell you
out some gold I've hid — a hundred thousand
llars!"

Keenly, suspicion lurking deep in his eyes, his mouth
lf open, seemingly ready to snap shut the instant he
tected greed or cupidity in Harlan's eyes, he watched
latter.

It seemed that he expected Harlan to betray a lust
r the gold he had mentioned; and he was ready to
se his lips and to die with his secret. And when he
w that apparently Harlan was unmoved, that he
trayed, seemingly, not the slightest interest, that

even his eyelids did not flicker at his words, nor his face change color — Morgan drew a tremulous sigh.

"You've got me guessin'," he confessed weakly. "I don't know whether you're a devil or a saint."

"I ain't claimin' nothin'," said Harlan. "An' I ain't carin' a damn about your gold. I'd a heap rather you wouldn't mention it. More than one man has busted his character chasin' that rainbow."

"You ain't interested?" demanded Morgan.

"Not none."

Morgan's eyes glowed with an eager light. For now that Harlan betrayed lack of interest, Morgan was convinced — almost — that the man's reputation for committing evil deeds had been exaggerated.

"You've got to be interested," he declared, lifting himself on his good arm and leaning toward Harlan. "It ain't the gold that is botherin' me so much, anyway — it's my daughter.

"It's all my own fault, too," he went on when he saw Harlan's eyes quicken. "I've felt all along that somethin' was wrong, but I didn't have sense enough to look into it. An' now, trustin' folks so much, an' not payin' strict attention to what was goin' on around me, I've got to the point where I've got to put everything into the hands of a man I never saw before — an outlaw."

"There ain't nobody crowdin' you to put anything into his hands," sneered Harlan. "I ain't a heap anxious to go around buttin' into trouble for you. Keep your yap shut, an' die like a man!"

Morgan laughed, almost triumphantly. "I'll do

ny dyin' like a man, all right—don't be afraid of hat. You want to hear what I've got to tell you?"

"I've got to listen. Shoot!"

"There's a gang of outlaws operatin' in the Lamo country. Luke Deveny is the chief. It's generally known that Deveny's the boss, but he keeps his tracks pretty well covered, an' Sheriff Gage ain't been able to get anything on him. Likely Gage is scared of him, anyway.

"Anyway, Gage don't do nothin'. Deveny's a bad man with a gun; there ain't his equal in the Territory. He's got a fellow that runs with him—Strom Rogers—who's almost as good as he is with a gun. They're holy terrors; they've got the cattlemen for two hundred miles around eatin' out of their hands. They're roarin', rippin' devils!

"There ain't no man knows how big their gang is—seems like half the people in the Lamo country must belong to it. There's spies all around; there ain't a thing done that the outlaws don't seem to know of it. They drive stock off right in front of the eyes of the owners; they rob the banks in the country; they drink an' kill an' riot without anyone interferin'.

"There ain't anyone knows where their hang-out is—no one seems to know anything about them, except that they're on hand when there's any devilment to be done.

"I've got to talk fast, for I ain't got long. I've never had any trouble with Deveny or Rogers, or any of the rest of them, because I've always tended to my

own business. I've seen the thing gettin' worse an worse, though; an' I ought to have got out of ther when I had a chance. Lately there ain't been n chance. They watch me like a hawk. I can't trus my men. The Rancho Seco is a mighty big place, ar I've got thirty men workin' for me. But I can't trus a damned one of them.

"About a year ago I found some gold in the Cisc Mountains near the ranch. It was nugget gold— only a pocket. I packed it home, lettin' nobody se me doin' it; an' I got it all hid in the house, excep the last batch, before anybody knowed anything abou it. Then, comin' home with the last of it, the damne bottom had to bust out of the bag right near the co ral gate, where Meeder Lawson, my foreman, wa standin' watchin' me.

"It turned out that he'd been watchin' me for long time. I never liked the cuss, but he's a goc cowman, an' I had to hold onto him. When he sa the gold droppin' out an' hittin' the ground like b hailstones, he grinned that chessie-cat grin he's gc an' wanted to know if I was through totin' it hom

"I wanted to know how he knowed there was mo of it, an' he said he'd been keepin' an eye on m an' knowed there was a heap more of it somewhe around.

"I fired him on the spot. There'd have been gu play, but I got the drop on him an' he had to slop Well, the next mornin' Luke Deveny rode up to whe I was saddlin', an' told me I'd have to take Laws back.

"I done so, for I knowed there'd be trouble with the outlaws if I didn't. I ain't never been able to get any of that gold to the assayer. They've been watchin' me like buzzards on a limb over some carrion. I don't get out of their sight.

"An' now they've finally got me. I've got a little of the gold in my pocket now — here it is." He drew out a small buckskin bag and passed it to Harlan, who took it and held it loosely in his hands, not taking his gaze from Morgan.

"Keep a-goin'," suggested Harlan.

"Interested, eh?" grinned Morgan; "I knowed you'd be. Well, here I am — I didn't get to the assay office at Pardo; an' I'll never get there now." He paused and then went on:

"Now they're after Barbara, my daughter. Deveny — an' Strom Rogers, an' some more — all of them, I reckon. I ought to have got out long ago. But it's too late now, I reckon.

"That damned Deveny — he's a wolf with women. Handsome as hell, with ways that take with most any woman that meets him. An' he's as smooth an' cold an' heartless as the devil himself. He ain't got no pity for nobody or nothin'. An' Strom Rogers runs him a close second. An' there's more of them almost as bad.

"They watch every trail that runs from the Rancho Seco to — to anywhere. If I ride north there's someone watchin' me. If I ride south there's a man on my trail. If I go east or west I run into a man or two who's takin' interest in me. When I go to Lamo,

there'll be half a dozen men strike town about the same time.

"I can't prove they are Deveny's men—but I know it, for they're always around. An' it's the same way with Barbara—she can't go anywhere without Deveny, or Rogers—or some of them—ain't trailin' her.

"As I said, the sheriff can't do anything—or he won't. He looks worried when I meet him, an' gets out of my way, for fear I'll ask him to do somethin'.

"That's the way it stands. An' now Barbara will have to play it a lone hand against them. Bill Morgan—that's my son—ain't home. He's gallivantin' around the country, doin' some secret work for the governor. Somethin' about rustlers an' outlaws. He ought to be home now, to protect Barbara. But instead he's wastin' his time somewheres else when he ought to be here—in Lamo—where's there's plenty of the kind of guys he's lookin' for.

"There's only one man in the country I trust. He's John Haydon, of the Star ranch—about fifteen miles west of the Rancho Seco. Seems to me that Haydon's square. He's an upstandin' man of about thirty, an' he's dead stuck on Barbara. Seems to me that if it wasn't for Haydon, Deveny, or Lawson, or Rogers, or some of them scum would have run off with Barbara long ago.

"You see how she shapes up?" he queried as he watched Harlan's face.

"Looks bad for Barbara," said Harlan slowly.

Morgan writhed and was silent for a time.

"Look here, Harlan," he finally said; "you're considered to be a hell-raiser yourself, but I can see in your eyes that you ain't takin' advantage of women. An' Harlan"—Morgan's voice quavered—"there's my little Barbara all alone to take care of herself with that gang of wolves around. I'm wantin' you to go to the Rancho Seco an' look around. My wife died last year. There's mebbe two or three guys around the ranch would stick to Barbara, but that's all. Take a look at John Haydon, an' if you think he's on the level—an' you want to drift on—turn things over to him."

Morgan shuddered, and was silent for a time, his lips tight-shut, his face whitening in the dusk as he fought the pain that racked him. When he at last spoke again his voice was so weak that Harlan had to kneel and lean close to him to hear the low-spoken words that issued from between his quavering lips:

"Harlan—you're white; you've got to be white—to Barbara! That paper I was tryin' to stuff into my gun—when you come around the rock. You take it. It'll tell you where the gold is. You'll find my will—in my desk in my office—off the *patio*. Everything goes to Barbara. Everybody knows that. Haydon knows it—Deveny's found it out. You can't get me back—it's too far. Plant me here—an' tell Barbara." He laughed hollowly. "I reckon that's all." He felt for one of Harlan's hands, found it, and gripped it with all his remaining strength. His voice was hoarse, quavering:

"You won't refuse, Harlan? You can't refuse!

Why, my little Barbara will be all alone, man! What a damned fool I've been not to look out for her!"

Night had come, and Morgan could not see Harlan's face. But he was conscious of the firm grip of Harlan's hands, and he laughed lowly and thankfully.

"You'll do it—for Barbara—won't you? Say you will, man! Let me hear you say it—now!"

"I'm givin' you my word," returned Harlan slowly. And now he leaned still closer to the dying man and whispered long to him.

When he concluded Morgan fought hard to raise himself to a sitting posture; he strained, dragging himself in the sand in an effort to see Harlan's face. But the black desert night had settled over them, and all Morgan could see of Harlan was the dim outlines of his head.

"Say it again, man! Say it again, an' light a match so's I can see you while you're sayin' it!"

There was a pause. Then a match flared its light revealing Harlan's face, set in serious lines.

"I wouldn't lie to you—now—Morgan," he said; "I'm goin' to the Lamo country to bust up Deveny's gang."

Morgan stared hard at the other while the flickering light lasted with a strained intensity that transfigured his face, suffusing it with a glow that could not have been more eloquent with happiness had the supreme Master of the universe drawn back the mysterious veil of life to permit him to look upon the great secret.

When the match flickered and went out, and the

darkness of the desert reigned again, Morgan sank back with a tremulous, satisfied sigh.

"I'm goin' now," he said; "I'm goin'—knowin' God has been good to me." He breathed fast, gaspingly. And for a moment he spoke hurriedly, as though fearful he would not be given time to say what he wanted to say:

"Someone plugged me—last night while I was sleepin'. Shot me in the chest—here. Didn't give me no chance. There was three of them. My fire had gone out an' I couldn't see their faces. Likely Laskar an' Dolver was two. The other one must have sloped. It was him shot me. Tried to knife me, too; but I fought him, an' he broke away. It happened behind a rock—off to the left—a red boulder.

"I grabbed at him an' caught somethin'. What it was busted. I couldn't wait to find out what it was. I'm hopin' it's somethin' that'll help you to find out who the man was. I ain't goin' to be mean—just when I'm dyin'; but if you was to look for that thing, find it, an' could tell who the man is, mebbe some day you'd find it agreeable to pay him for what he done to me."

He became silent; no sound except his fast, labored breathing broke the dead calm of the desert night.

"Somethin' more than the gold an' Barbara back of it all," he muttered thickly, seeming to lapse into a state of semiconsciousness in which the burden that was upon his mind took the form of involuntary speech: "Somethin' big back of it—somethin' they ain't sayin' nothin' about. But Harlan—he'll take

care of—" He paused; then his voice leaped. "Why, there's Barbara now! Why, honey, I thought—I—why——"

His voice broke, trailing of into incoherence.

After a while Harlan rose to his feet. An hour later he found the red rock Morgan had spoken of—and with a flaming bunch of mesquite in hand he searched the vicinity.

In a little depression caused by the heel of a boot he came upon a glittering object, which he examined in the light of the flaming mesquite, which he had thrown into the sand after picking up the glittering object. Kneeling beside the dying flame he discovered that the glittering trifle he had found was a two- or three-inch section of gold watch chain of peculiar pattern. He tucked it into a pocket of his trousers.

Later, he mounted Purgatory and fled into the appalling blackness, heading westward—the big black horse loping easily.

The first streaks of dawn found Purgatory drinking deeply from the green-streaked moisture of Kelso's water-hole. And when the sun stuck a glowing rim over the desert's horizon, to resume his rule over the baked and blighted land, the big black horse and his rider were traveling steadily, the only life visible in the wide area of desolation—a moving blot, an atom behind which was death and the eternal, whispered promise of death.

CHAPTER III

A GIRL WAITS

LAMO, sprawling on a sun-baked plain perhaps a mile from the edge of the desert, was one of those towns which owed its existence to the instinct of men to foregather. It also was indebted for its existence to the greed of a certain swarthy-faced saloonkeeper named Joel Ladron, who, anticipating the edict of a certain town marshal of another town that shall not be mentioned, had piled his effects into a prairie schooner—building and goods—and had taken the south trail—which would lead him wherever he wanted to stop.

It had chanced that he had stopped at the present site of Lamo. Ladron saw a trail winding over the desert, vanishing into the eastern distance; and he knew that where trails led there were sure to be thirsty men who would be eager to look upon his wares.

Ladron's history is not interesting. As time fled to the monotonous clink of coins over the bar, he set up in the frame shack that faced the desert trail Ladron's importance in Lamo was divided by six.

The other dispensers had not come together; they had appeared as the needs of the population seemed to demand—and all had flourished.

Lamo's other buildings had appeared without ostentation. There were twenty of them. A dozen of the twenty, for one reason or another, need receive no

further mention. Of the remaining few, one was occupied by Sheriff Gage; two others by stores; one answered as an office and storage-room for the stage company; and still another was distinguished by a crude sign which ran across its weather-beaten front, bearing the legend: "Lamo Eating-House." The others were private residences.

Lamo's buildings made some pretense of apeing the architecture of buildings in other towns. The eating-house was a two-story structure, with an outside stairway leading to its upper floor. It had a flat roof and an adobe chimney. Its second floor had been subdivided into lodging-rooms. Its windows were small, grimy.

Not one of Lamo's buildings knew paint. The structures, garish husks of squalor, befouled the calm, pure atmosphere, and mocked the serene majesty of nature.

For, beginning at the edge of "town," a contrast to the desert was presented by nature. It was a mere step, figuratively, from that land from which came the whisper of death, to a wild, virgin section where the hills, the green-brown ridges, the wide sweeps of plain, and the cool shadows of timber clumps breathed of the promise, the existence, of life.

To Barbara Morgan, seated at one of the east windows of the Lamo Eating-House—in the second story, where she could look far out into the desert—the contrast between the vivid color westward and the dun and dead flatness eastward, was startling. For she knew her father had entered the desert on his way

to Pardo, on some business he had not mentioned; and the whispered threat that the desert carried was borne to her ears as she watched.

On a morning, two days before, Morgan had left the Rancho Seco for Pardo. The girl had watched him go with a feeling — almost a conviction — that she should have kept him at home. She had not mentioned to him that she had a presentiment of evil, for she assured herself that she should have outgrown those puerile impulses of the senses. And yet, having watched him depart, she passed a sleepless night, and early the next morning had saddled her horse to ride to Lamo, there to await her father's return.

It was late in the afternoon when she reached Lamo; and she had gone directly to the Eating-House, where she had passed another restless night — spending most of her time sitting at the window, where she was at this minute.

Of course it was a three-day trip to Pardo, and she had no reason to expect Morgan to return until the end of the sixth day, at the very earliest. And yet some force sent her to the window at frequent intervals, where she would sit, as now, her chin resting in her hands, her eyes searching the vast waste land with an anxious light.

An attaché of the Eating-House had put her horse away — where, she did not know; and her meals had been brought to her by a middle-aged slattern, whose probing, suspicion-laden glances had been full of mocking significance. She had heard the woman speak of her to other female employees of the place — and once

she had overheard the woman refer to her as "that stuck-up Morgan heifer."

Their coarse laughter and coarser language had disgusted the girl, and she had avoided them all as much as possible.

It was the first time she had remained overnight in the Eating-House lodging-rooms, though she had seen the building many times during her visits to Lamo. It wasn't what she was accustomed to at the Rancho Seco, nor was it all that a lodging-house might be — but it provided shelter for her while she waited.

The girl felt — as she looked — decidedly out of place in the shabby room. Many times during her vigil she had shuddered when looking at the dirty, threadbare ingrain carpet on the floor of the room; oftener, when her gaze went to the one picture that adorned the unpapered walls, she shrank back, her soul filled with repugnance.

Art, as here represented, was a cheap lithograph in vivid colors, of an Indian — an Apache, judging from his trappings — scalping a white man. In the foreground, beside the man, was a woman, her hair disheveled, wild appeal in her eyes, gazing at the Indian, who was grinning at her.

A cheap bureau, unadorned, with a broken mirror swinging in a rickety frame; one chair, and the bed in which she had tried to sleep, were the only articles of furniture in the room.

The girl, arrayed in a neat riding habit; her hair arranged in graceful coils; her slender, lissom figure denoting youth and vigor; the clear, smooth skin of

her face — slightly tanned — indicating health — was as foreign to her present surroundings as life is foreign to the desert. In her direct eyes was the glow of sturdy honesty that had instantly antagonized the slattern who had attended her.

That glow was not so pronounced now — it was dulled by anxiety as she looked out of the window, watching the desert light fade as twilight came, blotting the hot sand from her sight, erasing the straight, unfeatured horizon, and creating a black void which pulsed with mystery.

She sighed when at last she could no longer penetrate the wall of darkness; got up and moved her chair to one of the front windows, from where she could look down into Lamo's one street.

Lamo's lights began to flicker; from the town's buildings sounds began to issue — multisonous, carrying the message of ribaldry unrestrained.

From a point not very far away came the hideous screeching of a fiddle, accompanied by a discordant, monotonous wail, as of someone singing a song unfamiliar to him; from across the street floated a medley of other noises, above which could be heard the jangling music of a heavily drummed piano. There came to her ears coarse oaths and the maudling laughter of women.

She had heard it all the night before; but tonight it seemed that something had been added to the volume of it. And as on the night before, she sat at the window, watching — for it was all new and strange to her — even if unattractive. But at last the horror of

it again seized her, and she closed the window, determined to endure the increased heat.

Half an hour later, lying, fully dressed, on the bed, she heard a voice in the hallway beyond the closed door of her room — a man's voice.

"It isn't what one might call elegant," said the voice; "but if it's the best you've got — why, of course, it will have to do."

The girl sat straight up in bed, breathless, her face paling.

"It's Luke Deveny!" she gasped in a suffocating whisper.

The man's voice was answered by a woman's — low, mirthful. The girl in the room could not distinguish the words. But the man spoke again — in a whisper which carried through the thin board partition to the girl:

"Barbara Morgan is in there — eh?" he said and the girl could almost see him nodding toward her room.

This time the girl heard the woman's voice — and her words:

"Yes she's there, the stuck-up hussy!"

The voice was that of the slattern.

The man laughed jeeringly.

"Jealous, eh?" he said. "Well, she *is* a mighty good-looking girl, for a fact!"

That was all. The girl heard Deveny step into a room — the room adjoining hers; she could hear his heavy boots striking the floor as he removed them.

For a long time the girl rested on her elbow, listen-

ing; but no further sounds came from the room into which Deveny had gone. At last, trembling, her face white with fear, the girl got up and stole noiselessly to the door.

A light bolt was the door's only fastening; and the girl stood long, with a hand upon it, considering its frailty. How easy it would be for a big man like Deveny to force the door. One shove of his giant shoulder and the bolt would give.

Stealthily, noiselessly, straining with every ounce of her strength, she managed to lift the cheap bureau and carry it to the door, placing it against the latter, barricading it. Not satisfied, she dragged the bed over against the bureau.

Even when that had been accomplished, she was not satisfied and during the greater part of the night she sat on the edge of the bed, listening and watching the door. For in the days that had fled Deveny had said certain things to her that she had not repeated to her father; he had looked at her with a significance that no man could have understood; and there had been a gleam in his eyes at these times which had convinced her that behind the bland smoothness of him—back of the suave politeness of his manner—was a primitive animalism. His suave politeness was a velvet veil of character behind which he masked the slavering fangs of the beast he really was.

CHAPTER IV

HIS SHADOW BEFORE

AT TEN o'clock the following morning, in a rear room of "Balleau's First Chance" saloon—which was directly across the street from the Lamo Eating-House—Luke Deveny and two other men were sitting at a card-table with bottle and glasses between them. A window in the eastern side of the room gave the men an unobstructed view of the desert, and for half an hour, as they talked and drank, they looked out through the window.

A tall, muscular man with a slightly hooked nose, keen blue eyes with a cold glint in them, black hair, and an equally black mustache which revealed a firm-lipped mouth with curves at the corners that hinted of synicism, and, perhaps cruelty, was sitting at the table so that he faced the window. His smile, as he again glanced out of the window, roved to Deveny—who sat at his right.

"One man—an' a led horse," he said shortly. "Looks like Laskar."

Deveny—big, smooth-shaven—with black, glowing, attractive eyes that held a glint quite as hard as that which shone in the eyes of the speaker, looked long out of the window at a moving dot on the desert, which seemed to be traveling toward them. Deveny had looked before; but now he saw two dots where at

other times he had seen only one. His lips held a slight pout as he glanced at the speaker.

"You're right, Rogers," he said; "there's only one. The old fool must have put up a fight."

Deveny filled a glass from the bottle and drank slowly. His features were large. His nose was well shaped, with wide nostrils that hinted of a fiery, passionate nature; his thrusting chin and the heavy neck muscles told of strength, both mental and physical—of mental strength that was of a tenacious character, of physical strength that would respond to any demand of the will.

He was handsome, and yet the suggestion of ruthlessness in the atmosphere of him—lurking behind the genial, easy-going exterior that he wore for appearances—or because it was his nature to conceal his passions until he desired to unleash them—was felt by those who knew him intimately. It had been felt by Barbara Morgan.

Deveny was king of the lawless element in the Lamo section. The magnetism of him; the arrogance, glossed over with the calm and cold politeness of his manner; his unvarying immaculateness; the air of large and complete confidence which marked his every action; the swiftness with which he struck when he was aroused, or when his authority was questioned, placed him without dissent at the head of the element that ruled the Lamo country.

Deveny ruled, but Deveny's rule was irksome to Strom Rogers—the man to whom Deveny had just spoken. For while Deveny drank, Rogers watched

him with covert vigilance, with a jeering gleam far back in his eyes, with a secret envy and jealousy, with hatred and contempt and mockery.

Yet there was fear in Rogers' eyes, too—a mere glimmer of it. Yet it was there; and when Deveny set his glass down and looked straight at Rogers, it was that fear which brought the fawning, insincere smirk to Rogers' lips.

"See the girl?" questioned Rogers.

Deveny laughed lowly. Apparently he did not notice the glow in Rogers' eyes; but had Rogers looked closely he might have seen Deveny's lips straighten as he shot a glance at the other.

"Had the room next to her last night. Heard her drag the bed in front of the door of her room. She knew I was there, all right!" Deveny laughed deeply. "She's wised up by this time. Lolly Kaye hates her—because Barbara's a good-looking girl, I suppose. That's like some women. Lolly would see Barbara roasting in hell and not give her a hand!"

"Lolly's been dissappointed in love—I reckon." Rogers' laugh was hollow, mirthless. And again Deveny shot a glance at him.

"But you didn't bother her—Barbara?" questioned Rogers in a dry, light voice.

"No," grinned Deveny; "that time hasn't come—yet. It's coming soon. I told Lolly to keep an eye on her; I've got Engle and Barthman and Kelmer watching at the doors so Barbara can't light out for the Rancho Seco. She don't get away until tomorrow. Then she goes with me to the end of Sunset Trail.

I've sent Shorty Mallo to Willow's Wells for the parson."

"Barbara know what's up?" Rogers' voice was low and throaty.

Again Deveny glanced at him — sharply.

"Hell, no!" he snapped. "It's none of her damned business — nor anybody's!" He grinned maliciously when he saw Rogers' face whiten.

"Barbara will need a husband now," Deveny went on. "With old Morgan gone and her brother sloped from the home ranch, she'll be kind of lonesome. I aim to cure her of that."

He laughed, and Rogers writhed inwardly. For Rogers had long nursed a secret hope that one day the fates might take a notion to give him the chance that Deveny intended to seize.

But Rogers was forced to conceal his jealousy and disappointment. He laughed mirthlessly.

"So she can't get away, eh? — she's corralled!"

"Bah!" declared Deveny; "she won't want to get away — once she knows what I mean — that it's going to be a regular wedding. She'll raise a fuss, most likely, to make folks believe she's unwilling, but in the end she'll get over it."

Deveny glanced out of the window at the blot that was now closer.

"It's Laskar, all regular," he said. "He's leading a sorrel horse — Dolver's horse. Old Morgan got Dolver — looks like, the damned old gopher! Men as willing as Dolver are not found every day." He looked at the third man, who had not spoken.

"Lawson," he said, "you mosey down the trail a little piece and meet Laskar. Bring him here!"

Lawson, a thin-faced, medium-sized man with narrow shoulders, whose distinguishing mark was a set of projecting upper teeth that kept his mouth in a continual smirking smile, got up quickly and went out. Deveny and Rogers, their thoughts centered upon the same person — Barbara Morgan — sat silent, watching Lawson as he rode down the street toward the point where the trail, crossing the broken stretch of country that intervened, merged into the desert.

Half an hour later Laskar, holding his chest, where Purgatory had kicked him, was sitting at the table in the rear room of the First Chance, cursing with a fluency that he had not yielded to in many years.

"Dolver's wiped out!" he gasped hoarsely; "plugged so quick he didn't know he was hit. A center shot — plumb in the heart; his own gun goin' off while he was fallin'. I looked him over — after. He was croaked complete. Then that sober-faced hyena lifts my gun — an' the rifle — an' says things to me, which I don't try to cross him. Then he goes behind the rock — where we was havin' it out — an' while he's gone I tries to git my guns from under that devil-eyed cayuse of his'n.

"An' I don't succeed — noways. That black devil turns on a half-dollar an' plants his hoofs plumb in my breast-bone. If I'd been an inch nearer, or if he'd have kicked me a foot lower, or a foot higher, I'd be layin' out there where Dolver is now, the coyotes an' the buzzards gnawin' at me."

Unmoved by Laskar's incoherence, Deveny calmly watched him. And now, when Laskar paused for breath, Deveny spoke slowly:

"A *black* horse, you said. How did a black horse get there? Old Morgan rode a bay when he left Lamo — Balleau says."

"Did I say Morgan rode a black horse?" queried Laskar, knowledge in his eyes that he had a thing to tell that would blanch their faces. He grinned, still holding his chest, his glance malicious.

"Did I say a *black* horse?" he repeated. "Did I say Morgan rode a black horse? Morgan didn't. Morgan rode a bay — an' the Chief run it off after he shot Morgan. But Morgan didn't die right away, an' the Chief he had to slope, he said — an' he did — leavin' me an' Dolver to finish old Morgan.

"We was tryin' our damnedest when this guy on the black horse pops up out of nowhere an' salivates Dolver."

"Who was it?"

This was Deveny. He was now leaning forward, a pout on his lips, watching Laskar with an intent, glowering gaze.

"'Drag' Harlan!" shouted Laskar. His face lighted with a hideous joy as he watched the effect of his news.

"'Drag' Harlan! Do you hear?" he went on. "'Drag' Harlan, the Pardo 'two-gun' man! He's headed toward Lamo. He bored Dolver, an' he said that soon as Morgan cashed in he was hittin' the breeze for here!"

Lawson, the man who had gone to meet Laskar, ejaculated hoarsely, and stood rigid, his mouth open, his eyes bulging. It was the involuntary expression of the astonishment and fear that had seized him. Laskar forgot the pain in his chest long enough to straighten and grin at Lawson.

Rogers' face had changed color. He, too, had become rigid. He had been in the act of reaching for the bottle on the table, and the hand that had been extended had been suddenly drawn back, so that the hand was now midway between his body and the bottle — and the fingers were clenched. The other hand, under the table, was likewise clenched, and the muscles of his jaws were corded. Into his eyes had come a furtive, restless gleam, and his face had paled.

Deveny gave no visible sign of perturbation. He coolly reached out, grasped the bottle that Rogers had been reaching for, and poured some of the amber fluid into one of the glasses. The other men watched him silently — all of them intent to note the tremor they expected to see.

Deveny's hand did not tremble. He noted the glances of the men — the admiration that came into their eyes as with steady muscles he raised the glass and drank — and he smiled with slight contempt.

"Coming here, eh?" he said evenly. "So he said that. Did he mention what he was coming for?"

"He didn't mention," replied Laskar.

"So he downed Dolver. Did he say what for?"

"Said Dolver had shot up his partner, Davey Langan — back in Pardo. Harlan was evenin' up."

"What do you know about Harlan?"

The question was addressed to all of them.

Rogers answered.

"He's a bad guy—all bad. He's an iceberg, an' he's got the snakiest gun-hand of any man in the country. Draws hesitatin'-like. A man don't know when he's goin' to uncork his smoke-wagons. I seen him put Lefty Blandin' out. He starts for his guns, an' then kind of stops, trickin' the other guy into goin' for his. Then, before the other guy can get his gun to workin', Harlan's stickin' his away, an' the guy's ready for the mourners.

"Harlan got his handle that way. He goes for his guns so slow an' hesitatin' that he seems to drag 'em out. But some way he's always shootin' first. An' they always let him off because it's mighty plain that the other guy tried to draw first."

"I've heard that," said Deveny slowly. "What's his record?"

"Plays her a lone hand," returned Rogers. He watched the other steadily.

Deveny toyed with a glass as he gazed out of the window. There was a cold, sullen gleam in his eyes when he finally looked at Laskar.

"You said Harlan told you he was coming here as soon as Morgan cashed in. According to that, Morgan must have been hit bad."

"The Chief said he bored him plenty. An' me an' Dolver must have got him some."

"You didn't get a chance to search Morgan?"

"No chance—he fit like a hyena; an' when he got

behind that damned rock there was no way of gettin' at him."

"Then," said Deveny, "according to what you say, Harlan will come here as soon as Morgan dies. And when you left there Morgan was in a bad way. Harlan is due most any time, then."

"That's the way I figger," agreed Laskar.

And now Laskar fidgeted. "I aim to be hittin' the breeze now—before Harlan hits town. This climate is gettin' unhealthy for me. Harlan give me notice."

"To leave town?"

It was Deveny who spoke. There was a snarl in his voice; he leaned forward and scowled at Laskar.

Laskar nodded.

Rogers cleared his throat, and Lawson moved his feet uneasily.

Deveny's scowl faded; he grinned coldly.

"Giving orders—is he?" he snapped. "Well, we'll see." He laughed. "When Harlan hits town it will be a sign that old Morgan's crossed the Divide. Well, there was no witnesses to Morgan's cashing in, and one man's word is as good as another's in this country."

"Meanin'?" questioned Rogers, noting the light in Deveny's eyes.

"Meaning that Laskar is going—right now—to whisper into Sheriff Gage's ear that he saw our friend, 'Drag' Harlan, killing old Morgan."

Rogers got to his feet, grinning. The gleam in his eyes indicated that he felt some relief over the prospect presented by Deveny's suggestion.

"Of course we ain't sure Harlan means to make trouble here," he told Deveny; "but it's just as well to shove him off onto the sheriff."

The four men walked to the front door of the First Chance, after pausing for a few minutes at the bar.

Outside, halting for an instant on the board platform in front of the saloon, Rogers, who had been the first to emerge, started as he glanced toward the desert, and then stood rigid, shading his hands with his eyes against the sun that poured into his face.

"He's comin' now!" he said.

Deveny and the others also looked into the blinding glare of the sun—likewise shading their eyes. And they saw, far out upon the vast sea of sand—yet not so far that they could not distinguish objects—a black horse coming steadily toward them.

Deveny was strangely silent, glowering toward the desert; Rogers folded his arms and faced the oncoming rider and the somber-coated animal he bestrode; Lawson scowled; and Laskar nervously estimated the distance that stretched between himself and the steady-eyed man who had told him certain things in a voice that had been entirely convincing.

CHAPTER V

A PRISON

BARBARA MORGAN had not been able to sleep except by fits and starts. A dozen times during the night she had caught herself on the verge of sinking into deep slumber, and each time she had got up and washed her eyes with some water from a pitcher on the bureau, determined that she would not take any chances of permitting Deveny to surprise her.

When the dawn came she was haggard and tired; and she got up listlessly, combed her hair, and washed her face, and dragged away the pieces of furniture that had formed the barricade at the door.

She felt more secure with the dawn, and when the sunlight began to stream into the east windows she opened the door of the room, descended the stairs, and took a short walk to the edge of town.

Returning, she saw a man arrayed in overalls, boots, a blue woolen shirt, and broad felt hat, standing in the doorway of the stable that, she felt, belonged to the Eating-House. Sight of the stable brought to her thoughts of her horse — Billy — and she decided to determine if the man who had taken charge of him had put him into the stable.

She paused before the door, directly in front of the man, who did not move aside to permit her to enter.

She thought at first that he was not aware of her desire — until she observed an amused light in his eyes;

ınd then she knew that he was purposely barring her vay.

"This is the Eating-House stable, I suppose?" she nquired quietly.

"You're supposin' is a heap correct, ma'am," grinned the man.

"Well," she said, "if you will kindly step aside I hall see if my horse is all right."

"Your horse is all right, ma'am," returned the man. 'I've just fed him."

Irritated by his attitude, she spoke sharply:

"Step aside, please; I am going into the stable!"

The man grinned widely. "It's ag'in' orders, na'am; you'll have to stay out."

"Whose orders?"

"Deveny's. You ain't to go into the stable."

She hesitated, afflicted with a queer sensation of veakness and indecision.

It was her fear of Deveny, she supposed, that made ıer feel that way, together with the conviction that Deveny must have known that she had been in the room next to the one he had taken, even before he had ascended the stairs. It seemed to her that this delib- erate interference with her must be inspired by evil ntentions, and for an instant panic overtook her.

Then, yielding to the flash of anger that surged over ıer, she drew the small revolver she always carried vith her on her rides, and presented it. She stepped oack a little, so that the man might not strike the veapon from her hand, and spoke shortly, command- ngly to him.

"Get away from that door!"

"Shootin', ma'am?" he drawled. "Oh, don't!"

He grinned at her and calmly began to roll a cigarette, at which action she gulped with dismay, wheeled swiftly, and walked to the stairs. She went up proudly enough, her head held high, for she divined that the man would be watching her. But when she entered her room her pride forsook her, and she sank into a chair by the east window, dismayed and frightened.

While she sat there the slatternly woman slowly opened the door and stuck her head in. She grinned widely at Barbara.

"Goin' ridin' this mawnin', deary?"

Barbara looked at her, saw the mockery in the jealous eyes, and turned her head again, making no reply.

"Too stuck up to talk, eh?" jibed the slattern. "Well, before you get out of here you'll be tickled enough to shoot off your gab. Bah! You an' your airs! If you want any grub this mawnin' you'll come down an' grab it yourself, I'm tellin' you that."

She slammed the door, her jeering laugh penetrating the partition with hideous resonance.

After the woman had gone Barbara got up, her lips set in resolute lines.

Once in the hall she started to walk toward the stairs, when she saw the cowboy of the stable lounging against the rail on the platform. He saw her at the instant she looked at him, and he grinned hugely.

"I reckon you've noticed I've sort of shifted," he said. "I keep goin' up — gettin' higher in the world."

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"Just loafin', I reckon," grinned the other. "An' obeyin' orders," he added instantly. "Much as I hate to disconvenience a lady, I ain't takin' no chances on rilin' Deveny."

"Do you mean that Deveny placed you here to watch me?"

"He didn't issue no particular orders as to where I was to do my standin'. But he was sure earnest about sayin' that you wasn't to leave your room."

"I left it once this morning."

"My fault," he grinned. "I was sneakin' a drink in the Antler, an' you slipped me. I'm bettin' it don't happen ag'in!"

Overcome with a cold terror that suddenly seized her, Barbara wheeled and re-entered her room, standing for an instant at the door as she locked it, and then walking to the chair and sinking nervelessly into it.

Somehow, she sensed the futility of further effort at escape. She was aware of Deveny's power in the country; she knew that he ruled Lamo as he ruled every foot of land in the section; and she was convinced that it would be wasted effort to call for help. Even her own sex — represented by the slattern, and most of the women in Lamo were of that type, in character — seemed to be antagonistic toward her. It seemed to her that they would mock her as the slattern had mocked her, should she appeal to them.

And as for the men of Lamo, they were not to be considered. She was certain she could not induce one

of them to act contrary to Deveny's wishes. For he father had told her about Lamo's men — how the were slaves to the will of the man whose deeds o outlawry had made him feared wherever men congre gated; and she knew Lamo itself was a sink-hole o iniquity where women were swallowed by the ev passions of men.

She might have appealed to Gage, the sheriff, an she thought of Gage while she sat at the window. Bu Gage, her father had told her, with disgust in his eye was a man of colorless personality and of little courag — a negligible character upon whom the good peopl of the section, who were pitifully few, could not d pend. Her father had told her that it was his opinio that Gage, too, was a slave to Deveny's will.

She wished now that she had not yielded to th impulse which had brought her to Lamo; but her li grew firm and her eyes defiant as she at last got up an walked to one of the front windows.

Now, more vividly than ever, could she understan the significance of Deveny's glances at her in the pas the light in his eyes had been an expression of pr meditated evil, awaiting an opportunity.

She was pale, and her hands were trembling as sh placed them on the sill of the front window an glanced down into the street, hoping that she mig see a friendly face; praying that one of the Ranch Seco men might have come to town during the nigh

But she saw no one she knew. Indeed, except for pony standing in front of a saloon down the street little distance, and several others hitched to a r

cross the street, in front of the First Chance saloon, amo seemed to be deserted. And a silence, deep and ortentous of evil, seemed to have settled over the own.

But as she leaned upon the sill a sound floated to her hrough the open window — a man's voice, so close to er that it made her start and stiffen. It was Deveny's oice, and it seemed to come from a point in the street irectly beneath the window.

"Did you find Gage?" it said.

Barbara leaned forward a little and looked down- ard. Below her, on the narrow board-walk that ran n front of the Eating-House, were four men. She ecognized three of them — Deveny, Strom Rogers, nd Meeder Lawson, the Rancho Seco foreman.

The other man was a stranger. Evidently it was he stranger to whom Deveny had spoken, for it was he stranger who answered.

"He's in his office now."

Deveny turned to Lawson and Rogers. "You two vait here, Laskar and myself will do the talking to Gage." He started away with the man who had an- wered him; then called back over his shoulder: Hang around; if there's trouble, you'll want to get n on it."

Deveny and Laskar walked down the street; the girl aw them enter the building occupied by the sheriff.

Wondering, intensely curious — for that word trouble" meant shooting in the vocabulary of men of he Deveny type — Barbara drew back until she was ertain the men in the street could not see her.

When Deveny and Laskar disappeared, Strom Rogers laughed sneeringly:

"Deveny's scared of 'Drag' Harlan, I reckon. It's a cheap frame-up."

"Aw, hell," jibed the other; "you're jealous, that's all. You'd like to see Harlan plug Deveny, eh; so's you'd have a chance with Barbara Morgan. I'd be a heap careful, if I was you, Rogers. Deveny knows you took a shine to Barbara Morgan. I seen him lookin' hostile at you when you was quizzin' him in Balleau's. He's next."

"This is a free country," returned Rogers. The girl caught the malignant note in his voice, and she leaned outward a little, trying to see his face, while she shivered with dread.

"Yes," laughed Lawson; "a man can cash in without any excuse, usual; all he's got to do is to cross Deveny. You're a damned fool, Strom, to go to takin' a shine to Barbara Morgan, when Deveny wants her. He's been waitin' for her, an' meanin' to have her, all along. He's only been waitin' until ol' Morgan cashed in, so's he'd have a chance to take her. Now that Morgan's dead his chance has come."

Silently, her face dead white, her eyes closed, Barbara slipped backward and crumpled into a heap on the dirty carpet of the room.

When she again opened her eyes it was to look wildly at the open window through which the terrible news had come. Then she dragged herself to it, and making no sound leaned her arms on the sill and listened again, her heart seeming to be in the clutch o

cy fingers, her brain atrophied, reeling in a chaos of ncoherent, agonized impulses.

She did not know how long she had been uncon-scious. She saw that Rogers and Lawson were still below, and still talking. So keen was her sense of hearing — every nerve straining in the effort to learn more — that the voices of the men came in through the window with a resonance that, she felt, must be audible to every person in Lamo.

"It ain't my style, that's all. I'd meet Harlan on the level, man to man, if he was lookin' for me. It's likely he ain't at that. I've heard, bad as he is, that he plays square. An' if I was runnin' things I'd take a look at him before chargin' him with killin' Lane Morgan, when the killin' had been done by the Chief, an' Dolver, an' Laskar."

It was Strom Rogers' voice. It bore conviction with it, even though there was passionate feeling behind it, mingled strangely with personal hatred and jealousy.

Dumbly, Barbara clutched the window-sill. One dry, agonized sob racked her; and then she sat on the floor, to stare vacantly at the dingy walls of the room.

Once more she heard Rogers' voice; this time there was a note of savage glee in it:

"There's Harlan now, just slippin' off his cayuse in front of Gage's place. 'Drag,' eh? Well, there don't seem to be nothin' impedin' his actions anywhere."

Prompted by the urge of a curiosity that she could not resist, Barbara reeled to her feet, and with her

hands resting on the window-sill leaned out and looked up the street.

In front of the sheriff's office, not more than thirty or forty feet distant, she saw a tall, well-built man standing beside the hitching rail that fringed the board sidewalk. He had evidently just dismounted, and he was standing at the head of a big, coal-black horse. He was in the act of hitching the animal, and his back was toward her.

She watched breathlessly until he turned. And then she stared hard at him, noting the steady, cold, alert eyes; the firm lips; the bigness of him, the atmosphere of capableness that seemed to surround him; the low-swung guns at his hips, with no flaps on the holsters, tops, and the bottoms of the holsters tied to his leather chaps with rawhide thongs.

Never had she seen a man like him. For some reason, as yet inexplicable to her, he brought into her troubled consciousness a feeling of cold calm, a refreshing influence that might be compared to the sweet of a cool and unexpected breeze in the middle of a hot day.

He dominated the group of men that instantly surrounded him; and the dominance was not of attire, for he was arrayed like the others. She saw Devereny standing near him, and the man Laskar behind Devereny and Sheriff Gage and several other men. And she saw Rogers and Lawson as they walked slowly toward him.

And then a realization of her loss, of the tragedy that had descended upon her, again assailed her; and

ury of intolerance against inaction seized her. She ould not stay in this room and suffer the hideous un-ertainty; she could not take Rogers' word that her ather had been killed. There must be some mistake. Perhaps Rogers knew she was at the window, listening, nd he had said that just to spite her. For she had dis-ouraged Rogers' advances as she had discouraged Deveny's.

Breathing fast, she unlocked the door and went out nto the hall.

The man whom Deveny had placed to guard her vas still lounging on the stair platform, and he grinned vhen he saw her.

"Comin' to try ag'in?" he grinned.

She smiled — a disarming smile that brought a fatu-ous gleam into the man's eyes, so that he permitted ier to come close to him.

"Deveny's got damn' good judgment," he said as he halted near him. "He knows a thoroughbred vhen he sees — Hell!"

The ejaculation came from his lips as Barbara eaped swiftly past him. He threw out a futile arm, nd stood for an instant, shocked into inaction as Barbara ran down the stairs toward the street. Then he man leaped after her, cursing. She could hear him aying: "Damn your hide! Damn your hide!" as ie came after her, his spurs jangling on the steps.

CHAPTER VI

CHAIN-LIGHTNING

TURNING from Purgatory, after he had dismounted in front of the sheriff's office, Harlan faced three men who stood just outside of the building, watching him.

The slightly humorous smile that curved Harlan's lips might have betrayed his reason for dismounting in front of the sheriff's office, for he had seen Laskar standing with the two other men. But no man could have told that he looked at Laskar directly, except Laskar himself, who would have sworn that Harlan did not remove his gaze from him, once he had slipped from Purgatory's back.

For Harlan's eyes told nothing. They seemed to be gazing at nothing, and at everything. For Gage, watching the man, was certain Harlan was looking directly at him as he grinned, and Deveny, like Laskar, was sure Harlan's gaze was upon him. And all of them, noting one another's embarrassment, stood silent, marveling.

And now Deveny discovered that Harlan was watching the three of them together — a trick which is accomplished by fixing the gaze upon some object straight in front of one; in this case it was Deveny's collar — and then including other objects on each side of the center object.

Steady nerves and an inflexible will are required to

keep the gaze unwavering, and a complete absence of self-consciousness. Thus Deveny knew he was standing in the presence of a man whose poise and self-control were marvelous; and he knew, too, that Harlan would be aware of the slightest move made by either of the three; more, he could detect any sign of concerted action.

And concerted action was what Deveny and Laskar and the sheriff had planned. And they had purposely dragged Laskar outside, expecting Harlan would do just as he had done, and as his eyes warned he intended to do.

"I'm after you, Laskar," he said softly.

Laskar stiffened. He made no move, keeping his hands at his sides, where they had been all the time that had elapsed since Harlan had dismounted.

Laskar's eyes moved quickly, with an inquiring flash in them, toward Deveny and the sheriff. It was time for Deveny and the sheriff to precipitate the action they had agreed upon.

But the sheriff did not move. Nor did Deveny change his position. A queer, cold chill had come over Deveny — a vague dread, a dragging reluctance — an indecision that startled him and made of his thoughts an odd jumble of half-formed impulses that seemed to die before they could become definite.

He had faced gun-fighters before, and had felt no fear of them. But something kept drumming into his ears at this instant with irritating insistence that this was not an ordinary man; that standing before him, within three paces, his eyes swimming in an unfixed

vacuity which indicated preparation for violent action, was Harlan—"Drag" Harlan, the Pardo two-gun man; Harlan, who had never been beaten in a gun-fight.

Could he—Deveny—beat him? Could he, now, with "Drag" Harlan watching the three of them, could he draw with any hope of success, with the hope of beating the other's lightning hand on the downward flash to life or death?

Deveny paled; he was afraid to take the chance. His eyes wavered from Harlan's; he cast a furtive glance at the sheriff.

Harlan caught the glance, smiled mirthlessly and spoke shortly to Laskar:

"I told you to keep hittin' the breeze till there wasn't any more breeze," he said. "I ought to have bored you out there by the red rock. I gave you your chance. Flash your gun!"

"Harlan!"

This was Gage. His voice sounded as though it had been forced out: it was hoarse and hollow.

Harlan did not move, nor did his eyes waver. There was feeling in them now: intense, savage, cold. And his voice snapped.

"You're the sheriff, eh? You want to gas, I reckon. Do it quick before this coyote goes for his gun."

The sheriff cleared his throat. "You're under arrest, Harlan, for killin' Lane Morgan out there in the desert yesterday."

Harlan's eyes narrowed, his lips wreathed into a feline smile. But he did not change his position.

"Who's the witness against me?"

"Laskar."

"Has he testified?"

"He's goin' to."

Harlan backed away a little. His grin was tiger-like, a yellow flame seemed to leap in his eyes. Laskar, realizing at last that he could hope for no assistance from Gage or Deveny, grew rigid with desperation.

Death was in front of him; he knew it. Death or a deathless fame. The fates had willed one or the other, and he chose to take the gambler's chance, the chance he and Dolver and the Chief had refused Lane Morgan.

Deathless fame, the respect and the admiration of every man in the section was his if he beat "Drag" Harlan to the draw. Forever afterward, if he beat Harlan, he would be pointed at as the man who had met the Pardo gunman on even terms and had downed him.

He stepped out a little, away from the front of the building, edging off from Deveny and Gage so that Harlan would have to watch in two directions.

Lawson and Rogers, having advanced to a position within a dozen paces of the group in front of the sheriff's office, now backed away, silent, watchful. Other men who had been standing near were on the move instantly. Some dove into convenient doorways, others withdrew to a little distance down the street. But all intently watched as Laskar showed by his actions that he intended to accept his chance.

Deveny, too, watched intently. He kept his gaze fixed upon Harlan, not even glancing toward Laskar. For Deveny's fear had gone, now that the dread presence had centered its attention elsewhere, and he was determined to discover the secret of Harlan's hesitating "draw," the curious movement that had given the man his sobriquet, "Drag." The discovery of that secret might mean much to him in the future; it might even mean life to him if Harlan decided to remain in the section.

Harlan had made no hostile movement as yet. He still stood where he had stood all along, except for the slight backward step he had taken before Laskar began to move. But he watched Laskar as the latter edged away from the other men, and when he saw Laskar's eyes widen with the thought that precedes action, with the gleam that reflects the command the brain transmutes to the muscles, his right hand flashed downward toward the hip.

With a grunt, for Harlan had almost anticipated his thoughts, Laskar's right hand swept toward the butt of his pistol.

But Harlan's hand had come to a poise, just above the stock of his weapon — a pause so infinitesimal that it was merely a suggestion of a pause.

It was enough, however, to throw Laskar off his mental balance, and as he drew his weapon he glanced at Harlan's holster.

A dozen men who watched swore afterward that Laskar drew his gun first; that it was in his hand when Harlan's bullet struck him. But Deveny knew

better; he knew that Laskar was dead on his feet before the muzzle of his weapon had cleared the holster, and that the shot he had fired had been the result of involuntary muscular action; that he had pulled the trigger after Harlan's bullet struck him, and while his gun had been loosening in his hand.

For Deveny had seen the bullet from Laskar's gun throw up sand at Harlan's feet after Harlan's weapon had sent its death to meet Laskar. And Deveny had discovered the secret of Harlan's "draw." The pause was a trick, of course, to disconcert an adversary. But the lightning flash of Harlan's hand to his gun-butt was no trick. It was sheer rapidity, his hand moving so fast that the eye could not follow.

And Deveny could get no pleasure from his discovery. Harlan had waited until Laskar's fingers were wrapped around the stock of his pistol before he had drawn his own, and therefore in the minds of those who had witnessed the shooting, Harlan had been justified.

Sheriff Gage thought so, too. For, after Laskar's body had been carried away, Harlan stepped to where the sheriff stood and spoke shortly:

"You wantin' me for this?"

Sheriff Gage shook his head. "I reckon everybody saw Laskar go for his gun. There was no *call* for him to go for his gun. If you'd have shot him without him reachin' for it things would have been different."

Harlan said coldly, "I'm ready for that trial, now."

The sheriff's eyes glowed with some secret significance as they met Harlan's. He was standing at a

little distance from Deveny, and he deliberately closed an eye at Harlan.

"Trial—hell!" he declared, "you've destroyed the evidence."

Harlan wheeled, to see Deveny standing near. And for an instant as their eyes met—Harlan's level and cold, Deveny's aflame with a hostility unmistakable—the crowd which had witnessed the shooting of Laskar again became motionless, while a silence, portending further violence, descended over the street.

Then Deveny abruptly wheeled and began to walk across to the First Chance.

He had not taken many steps, however, when there were sounds of commotion farther down the street toward the Eating-House—a man cursing and a girl screaming.

Deveny halted and faced the point from which the sounds came, and a scowl appeared on his face.

Harlan wheeled, also. And he saw, at a little distance down the street, a girl running, her hair tossing in a mass around her, her eyes wild with fright and terror. Behind her came a man, cursing as he ran.

Harlan heard Sheriff Gage curse, too—heard him say:

"That's Lane Morgan's daughter—Barbara! What in hell is she doin' here?"

The girl, not more than a dozen feet ahead of her pursuer, ran straight toward Harlan. And when—as she drew closer and he saw that she was, indeed, actually coming toward him—her eyes on him as though she had singled him out as a protector—he

advanced toward her, drawing one of his guns as he went.

And, grinning as she neared him, he opened his arms wide and she ran straight into them, and laid her head on his shoulder, sobbing, and talking incoherently. While Harlan, his grin fading as he looked at her pursuer — who had halted within half a dozen paces of the girl — commanded lowly:

"You're runnin' plumb into a heap of trouble, mister man. Throw your rope around the snubbin' post. Then get on your hind legs an' do some explainin' What you chasin' this girl for?"

The man reddened, looked downward, then up at Deveny. The latter, a pout on his lips, his eyes glowing savagely, walked to where Harlan stood with one arm around the girl, while Lawson, Rogers, Gage, and several other men advanced slowly and stood near him.

CHAPTER VII

SINGLE-HANDED

NOTING the concerted movement toward him, Harlan grinned at Barbara, gently disengaged himself from her grasp, and urged her toward the door of the sheriff's office. She made no objection, for she felt that further trouble impended, and she knew she must not impede any action her rescuer planned.

Reaching the street a few minutes before, she had noted the preparations for the swift tragedy that had followed; and despite her wild desire to escape Deveny's man, she had halted, fascinated by the spectacle presented by the two men, gambling with death.

She had halted at a little distance, crouching against the front of a building. And while she had been crouching there, trembling with a new apprehension, her pursuer had caught her.

She had hardly been aware of him, and his grasp on her arm she had not resisted, so intense was her interest in what was transpiring. But the sudden ending of the affair brought again into her consciousness the recollection of her own peril, and when she saw Deveny cross the street she broke from the man's restraining grasp and ran to Harlan, convinced that he — because he seemed to be antagonistic toward the forces arrayed against her — would protect her.

And now, shrinking into the open doorway of the

sheriff's office, she watched breathlessly, with straining senses, the moving figures in the drama.

Harlan had backed a little way toward the doorway in which Barbara stood. The movement was strategic, and had been accomplished with deliberation. He was facing Lamo's population — at least that proportion of it which was at home — with the comforting assurance that no part of it could get behind him.

The gun he had drawn upon the approach of Barbara's pursuer was still in his right hand. It menaced no one, and yet it seemed to menace everyone within range of it.

For though the gun was held loosely in Harlan's hand, the muzzle downward, there was a glow in the man's eyes that conveyed a warning.

The smile on his face, too, was pregnant with the promise of violence. It was a surface smile, penetrating no deeper than his lips, and behind it, partially masked by the smile, the men in the group in the street could detect the destroying passion that ruled the man at this instant.

Deveny, who had approached to a point within a dozen feet of Harlan, came to a slow, reluctant halt when he caught a glimpse of the strange glow in Harlan's eyes. All the others, Sheriff Gage included, likewise halted — most of them at a considerable distance, as their conceptions of prudence suggested.

Harlan's grin grew ironic as he noted the pause — the concerted rigidity of Lamo's population.

"Seems there's a heap of folks wantin' to palaver,"

he said lowly. "An' no one is crowdin' me. That's polite an' proper. Seems you all sort of guessed there's plenty of room, an' crowdin' ain't necessary. I'd thank every specimen to hook his thumbs in the armholes of his vest—same as though he's a member of the pussy-café outfit which I've seen in Chicago, makin' moon-eyes at girls. If there's any of you ain't got on vests, why, you can fasten your sky-hooks on your shoulders any way to suit your idee of safety. Get them up!"

It seemed ludicrous to Barbara, despite the shadow of tragedy that lurked over it all—the embarrassed manner in which Lamo's citizens complied with the command, and the spectacle they presented afterward.

Deveny's hands were the last to go up. There was a coldly malignant glare in his eyes as under Harlan's unwavering gaze he finally raised his hands and held them, palms outward, as for inspection.

Rogers had complied instantly. There was a smile on his face, faint and suggestive of grim amusement, for he had been mentally tortured over the contemplation of Barbara's predicament, and had been unable to think of any plan by which he might assist her.

Meeder Lawson's face was sullen and full of impotent rage, and he watched Deveny with a gaze of bitter accusation when he saw that the big man intended to obey Harlan's order. Barbara's pursuer, having felt Deveny's angry gaze upon him, and being uncomfortably conscious that Harlan had not forgotten him, was red of face and self-conscious. He started, and the red in his face deepened, when Harlan,

in the silence which followed the concerted raising of hands, spoke sharply to him:

"What was you tryin' to corral that girl for? Talk fast or I'll bust you wide open!"

The man grinned foolishly, shooting a furtive glance at Deveny.

"Why," he said, noting Deveny's scowl, "I reckon it was because I'd took a shine to her. I was tryin' to cotton up to her on the landin' about the Eatin'-House, an' she——"

"You lie!"

This was Barbara. Pale, her eyes flashing with indignation, she stepped down into the street, standing near Harlan.

"That man," Barbara went on, pointing to the red-faced pursuer, "told me early this morning that Luke Deveny had told him to watch me, that I was not to leave my room until Deveny came for me. I was a prisoner. He didn't try to make love to me. I should have killed him."

Speech had broken the tension under which Barbara had been laboring; the flow of words through her lips stimulated her thoughts and sent them skittering back to the salient incidents of her enforced confinement; they brought into her consciousness a recollection of the conversation she had heard between Meeder Lawson and Strom Rogers, regarding her father. She forgot Harlan, Deveny, and the others, and ran to Sheriff Gage.

Gage, a tall, slender man of forty, was pale and uncomfortable as he looked down at the girl's white, up-

turned face. He shrank from the frenzied appeal of her eyes, and he endured the pain of her tightly gripping fingers on the flesh of his arms without flinching.

"Did—is father *dead!*"

She waited, frantically shaking Gage. And Gage did not answer until his gaze had roamed the crowd.

Then he said slowly and reluctantly:

"I reckon he's dead. Deveny was tellin' me—he was chargin' this man, Harlan, with killin' your father."

Barbara wheeled and faced Deveny. Rage, furious and passionate, had overwhelmed the grief she felt over the death of her father. The shock had been tremendous, but it had come while she had been leaning out of the window listening to Rogers and Lawson—when she had lain for many minutes unconscious on the floor of the room. Therefore the emotion she experienced now was not entirely grief, it was rather a frantic yearning to punish the men who had killed her father.

"You charged this man with murdering my father?" she demanded of Deveny as she walked to him and stood, her hands clenched, her face dead white and her eyes blazing hate. "You know better. I heard Strom Rogers tell Meeder Lawson that it was Dolver and Laskar and somebody he called the 'Chief,' who did it. I want to know who those men are; I want to know where I can find them! I want you to tell me!"

"You're unstrung, Barbara," said Deveny slowly, coolly, a faint smile on his face. "I know nothing

about it. I merely repeated to Gage the word Laskar brought. Laskar said this man Harlan shot your father. It happened about a day's ride out—near Sentinel Rock. If Laskar lied, he was paid for his lying. For Harlan has——"

Deveny paused, the sentence unfinished, for the girl turned abruptly from him and walked to Harlan.

"That was Laskar—the man you killed just now?"

"Laskar an' Dolver," relied Harlan. "There was three of them your father said. One got away in the night, leavin' Dolver an' Laskar to finish the job. I run plumb into them, crossin' here from Pardo. I bored Dolver, but I let Laskar off, not havin' the heart to muss up the desert with scum like him."

The girl's eyes gleamed for an instant with venomous satisfaction. Then she said, tremulously:

"And father?"

"I buried him near the rock," returned Harlan, lowly.

Soundlessly, closing her eyes, Barbara sank into the dust of the street.

Harlan broke the force of her fall with his left hand, supporting her partially until she collapsed; then, his eyes alight with a cold flame, he called, sharply, his gaze still on the group of men:

"Get her, Gage! Take her into your place!"

He waited until Gage carried the slack form inside. Then, his shoulders sagging, the heavy pistol in his right hand coming to a poise, the fingers of the left hand brushing the butt of the weapon in the holster at his left hip, the vacuous gleam in his eyes telling

them all that his senses were alert to catch the slightest movement, he spoke, to Deveny:

"I seen that desert deal. It wasn't on the level. I ain't no angel, but when I down a man I do it fair an' square — givin' him his chance. I sent that sneak Dolver out — an' that coyote Laskar. It was a dirty, rotten deal, the way they framed up on Morgan. It's irritated me — I reckon you can hear my rattles right now. I'm stayin' in Lamo, an' I'm stickin' by this Barbara girl until you guys learn to walk straight up, like men!"

He paused, and a heavy silence descended. No man moved. A sneer began to wreathe Harlan's lips — a twisting, mocking, sardonic sneer that expressed his contempt for the men who faced him.

"Not havin' any thoughts, eh?" he jeered. "There's some guys that would rather do their fightin' with women, an' their thoughts wouldn't sound right if they put words around them. I ain't detainin' you no longer. Any man who thinks it's time to call for a show-down can do his yappin' right now. Them that's dead certain they're through can mosey along, takin' care not to try any monkey business!"

He stood, watching, his wide gaze including them all, until, one after another the men in the group silently moved away. They did not go far. Some of them merely stepped into near-by doorways, others sauntered slowly down the street and halted at a little distance to look back.

But no man made a hostile move, for they had seen the tragedy in which Laskar had figured, and they had

no desire to provoke Harlan to express again the cold wrath that slumbered in his eyes.

Meeder Lawson was the first of Deveny's intimates to leave the group. His face sullen, his eyes venomous, he walked across the street to the First Chance, and stood in the doorway, beside Balleau, who had been an interested onlooker.

Then Strom Rogers moved. He wheeled slowly, flashing an inquiring glance at Deveny—who still stood motionless. Deveny had lowered his hands—they were hanging at his sides, the right hand having the palm toward Harlan, giving eloquent testimony of its owner's peaceable intentions.

Rogers' glance included the out-turned palm, and his lips curved in a faint smile. The smile held as his glance went to Harlan's face, and for an instant as the eyes of the two men met, appraisal was the emotion that ruled in them. Harlan detected in Rogers' eyes a grim scorn of Deveny, and a malignant satisfaction; Rogers saw in Harlan's eyes a thing that not one of the men who had faced the man had seen—cold humor.

Then Rogers was walking away, leaving Deveny to face the man who had disrupted his plans.

Deveny had not changed his position, and for an instant following the departure of Rogers, there was no word spoken. Then for the first time since he had dismounted from Purgatory, Harlan's eyes lost their wide, inclusive vacuity. They met Deveny's fairly, with a steady, direct, boring intensity; a light in them that resembled the yellow flame that Deveny had once

seen in the eyes of a Mexican jaguar some year before at a camp on the Neuces.

Deveny knew what the light in Harlan's eyes meant. It meant the presence of a wild, rending passion, of elemental impulses; it meant that the man who faced him was eager to kill him, was awaiting his slightest hostile movement. It meant more. The gleam in Harlan's eyes indicated that the man possessed that strange and almost uncanny instinct of thought reading, that he could detect in another's eyes a mental impulse before the other's muscles could answer it. Also, it meant certain death to Deveny should he obey the half-formed determination to draw and shoot, that was in his mind at this instant.

He dropped his lids, attempting to veil the thought from Harlan. But when he again looked up it was to see Harlan's lips twisting into a cold smile—to see Harlan slowly sheathing the gun he had held in his right hand.

And now Harlan was standing before him, both weapons in their holsters. He and Deveny were facing each other upon a basis of equality. Harlan had disdained taking advantage.

Apparently, if Deveny now elected to draw and shoot, his chances were as good as Harlan's.

And yet Deveny knew they were not as good. For Harlan's action in sheathing his gun convinced Deveny that the man had divined his thoughts from the expression of his eyes before he had veiled them with the lids, and he was convinced that Harlan had sensed the chill of dread that had swept over him at that in-

stant. He was sure of it when he heard Harlan's voice, low and taunting:

"You waitin' for a show-down?"

Deveny smiled, pallidly. "I don't mind telling you that I *did* have a notion that way a moment ago. But I was afraid I might be a little slow. When you downed Laskar I watched you, trying to learn the secret of your draw. I didn't learn it, because there is no secret—you're just a natural gunslinger without a flaw. You're the fastest man with a gun I ever saw—and I'm taking my hat off to you."

Harlan smiled faintly, but his eyes did not lose their alertness, nor did the flame in them cool visibly. Only his lips betrayed whatever emotion he felt. He distrusted Deveny, for he had seen the half-formd determination in the man's eyes, and his muscles were tensed in anticipation of a trick.

"You didn't stay here to tell me that. Get goin' with the real talk."

"That's right—I didn't," said Deveny. He was cool, now, and bland, having recovered his poise.

"Higgins *was* watching Barbara Morgan at my orders. But I meant no harm to the girl. I knew she was in town, and I heard there were a few of the boys that were making plans about her. So I set Higgins to guard her. Naturally, she thought I meant harm to her."

"Naturally," said Harlan.

Deveny said coolly: "I'll admit I have a bad reputation. But it doesn't run to women. It's more in your line." He looked significantly at the other.

"Meanin'?"

"Oh, hell— you know well enough what I mean. You're not such a law-abiding citizen, yourself. I've heard of you—often. And I've admired you. To get right down to the point—I could find a place where you'd fit in just right. We're needing another man—a man of your general size and character."

Harlan grinned. "I'm thankin' you. An' I sure appreciate what you've said. You've been likin' me so much that you tried to frame up on me about sendin' Lane Morgan out."

"That's business," laughed Deveny. "You were an unknown quantity, then."

"But not now—eh?" returned Harlan, his eyes gleaming with a cold humor. "You've got me sized up right. The yappin' I done about stickin' to Barbara Morgan wasn't the real goods, eh?"

"Certainly not!" laughed Deveny, "there must be some selfish motive behind that."

"An' you sure didn't believe me?"

"Of course not," chuckled Deveny, for he thought he saw a gleam of insincerity in Harlan's eyes.

"Then I've got to do my yappin' all over again," said Harlan. "Now get this straight. I'm stickin' to Barbara Morgan. I'm runnin' the Rancho Seco from now on. I'm runnin' it *my* way. Nobody is botherin' Barbara Morgan except them guys she wants to have bother her. That lets you out. You're a rank coyote, an' I don't have no truck with you except at the business end of a gun. Now take your damned, sneakin' grin over an' wet it down, or I'll blow you apart!"

Deveny's face changed color. It became bloated with a poisonous wrath, his eyes gleamed evilly and his muscles tensed. He stood, straining against the murder lust that had seized him, almost persuaded to take the slender chance of beating Harlan to his weapon.

"You got notions, eh?" he heard Harlan say, jeeringly. "Well, don't spoil 'em. I'd admire to make you feel like you'd ought to have got started a week ago."

Deveny smiled with hideous mirthlessness. But he again caught the flame in Harlan's eyes. He wheeled, saying nothing more, and walked across the street without looking back.

Smiles followed him; several men commented humorously, and almost immediately, knowing that this last crisis had passed, Lamo's citizens resumed their interrupted pleasures.

Harlan stood motionless until Deveny vanished into the First Chance, then he turned quickly and entered the sheriff's office.

CHAPTER VIII

BARBARA IS PUZZLED

HALF an hour later, with Barbara Morgan, on "Billy"—a piebald pinto—riding beside him, Harlan loped Purgatory out of Lamo. They took a trail—faint and narrow—that led southward, for Barbara had said that the Rancho Seco lay in that direction.

Harlan had not seen Deveny or Rogers or Lawson after the scene in front of the sheriff's office. He had talked for some time with Gage, waiting until Barbara Morgan recovered slightly from the shock she had suffered. Then when he had told her that he intended to accompany her to the Rancho Seco—and she had offered no objection—he had gone on a quest for her pony, finding him in the stable in the rear of the Eating-House.

So far as Harlan knew, no one in Lamo besides Sheriff Gage had watched the departure of himself and Barbara. And there had been no word spoken between the two as they rode away—Lamo becoming at last an almost invisible dot in the great yawning space they left behind them.

Barbara felt a curious unconcern for what was happening; her brain was in a state of dull apathy, resulting from shock and the period of dread under which she had lived for more than a day and a night.

She did not seem to care what happened to her.

She knew, to be sure, that she was riding toward the Rancho Seco with a man whom she had heard called an outlaw by other men; she was aware that she must be risking something by accepting his escort — and yet she could not bring herself to feel that dread fear that she knew any young woman in her position should feel.

It seemed to her that nothing mattered now — very much. Her father was dead — murdered by some men — two of whom had been punished by death, and another — a mysterious person called the "Chief" — who would be killed as soon as she could find him. That resolution was deeply fixed in her mind.

Her gaze though, after a while, went to Harlan, and for many miles she studied him without his suspecting. And gradually she began to think about him, to wonder why he had protected her from the man, Higgins, and why he was going with her to the Rancho Seco.

She provided — after a while — an answer to her first question: He had protected her because she had run into his arms in her effort to escape the clutches of the man who had pursued her — Higgins. She remembered that while she had been at the window, watching Harlan when he had dismounted in front of the sheriff's office, he had seemed to make a favorable impression upon her.

That was the reason, when she had seen him before her in the street, after he had shot Laskar, she had selected him as a protector. That had seemed to be the logical thing to do, for he had arrayed himself against her enemies in killing Laskar, and it was rea-

sonable to suppose — conceding Laskar and Higgins were leagued with Deveny — that Harlan would protect her.

It all seemed exceedingly natural, that far. It was when she began to wonder why Harlan was with her now that an element of mystery seemed to rule. And she was puzzled.

She began to speculate over Harlan, and her mental efforts in that direction banished the somber thoughts that had almost overwhelmed her after the discovery of her father's death. Yet they had ridden more than ten miles before she spoke.

"What made you decide to ride with me to the Rancho Seco?" she demanded sharply.

Harlan flashed a grin at her. He was riding a little in advance of her, and he had to turn in the saddle to see her face.

"I was headin' that way, an' wanted company. It sure gets lonesome ridin' alone."

She caught her breath at this answer, for it seemed that he had not revealed the real reason. And she had got her first good look at his face. It was lean and strong. His eyes were deep-set and rimmed by heavy lashes and brows, and there was a glow in them as he looked at her — a compelling fixity that held her. Her own drooped, and were lifted to his again in sheer curiosity, she thought at first.

It was only when she found herself, later, trying to catch his glance again that she realized they were magnetic eyes, and that the glow in them was of a subtle quality that could not be analyzed at a glance.

The girl was alert to detect a certain expression in his eyes — a gleam that would tell her what she half feared — that the motive that had brought him with her was like that which had caused Deveny to hold her captive. But she could detect no such expression in Harlan's eyes, she could see a quizzical humor in his glances at times, or frank interest, and there were times when she saw a grim pity.

And the pity affected her strangely. It brought him close to her — figuratively; it convinced her that he was a man of warm sympathies in spite of the reputation he held in the Territory.

She had heard her father speak of him — always with a sort of awe in his voice; and tales of his reckless daring, his Satanic cleverness with a six-shooter, of his ruthlessness, had reached her ears from other sources. He had seemed, then, like some evil character of mythology, remote and far, and not likely to appear in the flesh in her section of the country.

It seemed impossible that she had fled to such a man for protection — and that he had protected her; and that she was now riding beside him — or slightly behind him — and that, to all appearances, he was quite as respectful toward her as other men. That, she surmised, was what made it all seem so strange.

Harlan did not seem disposed to talk; and he kept Purgatory slightly in the lead — except when the trail grew dim or disappeared altogether. Then he would pull the black horse up, look inquiringly at Barbara, and urge Purgatory after her when she took the lead.

But there were many things that Barbara wanted to

inquire about; and it was when they were crossing a big level between some rimming hills, where the trail was broad, that she urged her pony beside the black.

"Won't you tell me about father — how he died?" she asked.

He looked sharply at her, saw that she was now quite composed, and drawing Purgatory to a walk, began to relate to her the incident of the fight at Sentinel Rock. His story was brief — brutally brief, she might have thought, had she not been watching his face during the telling, noting the rage that flamed in his eyes when he spoke of Dolver and Laskar and the mysterious "Chief."

It was plain to the girl that he had sympathized with her father; and it was quite as plain that he now sympathized with her. And thus she mentally recorded another point in his favor:

He might be a gunman, a ruthless killer, an outlaw of such evil reputation that men mentioned his name with awe in their voices — but she *knew,* now, that he had a keen sense of justice, and that the murder of her father had aroused the retributive instinct in him.

Also, she was convinced that compared to Deveny, Rogers, and Lawson, he was a gentleman. At least, so far he had not looked at her as those men had looked at her. He had been with her now for several hours, in a lonely country where there was no law except his own desires, and he had been as gravely courteous and considerate as it was possible for any man to be.

When he finished his story, having neglected to men-

tion the paper he had removed from one of the cylinders of Morgan's pistol — upon which was written instructions regarding the location of the gold Morgan had secreted — Barbara rode for a long time in silence, her head bowed, her eyes moist.

At last she looked up. Harlan's gaze was straight ahead; he was watching the trail, where it vanished over the crest of a high ridge, and he did not seem to be aware of Barbara's presence.

"And father told you to tell me — wanted you to bring the news to me?"

Harlan nodded.

"Then," she went on "your obligation — if you were under any — seems to have been completed. You need not have come out of your way."

"I was headed this way."

"To the Rancho Seco?" she questioned, astonished.

Again he nodded. But this time there was a slight smile on his lips.

Her own straightened, and her eyes glowed with a sudden suspicion.

"That's odd," she said; "very odd."

"What is?"

"That you should be on your way to the Rancho Seco — and that you should encounter father — that you should happen to reach Sentinel Rock about the time he was murdered."

He looked straight at her, noting the suspicion in her eyes. His low laugh had a hint of irony in it.

"I've heard of such things," he said.

"What?"

"About guys happenin' to run plumb into a murder when they was innocent of it—an' of them bein' accused of the murder."

It was the mocking light in his eyes that angered her, she believed—and the knowledge that he had been aware of her suspicion before it had become half formed in her mind.

"I'm not accusing you!" she declared.

"You said it was odd that I'd be headed this way—after I'd told you all there was to tell."

"It is!" she maintained.

"Well," he conceded; "mebbe it's odd. But I'm still headin' for the Rancho Seco. Mebbe I forgot to tell you that your father said I was to go—that he made me promise to go."

He had not mentioned that before; and the girl glanced sharply at him. He met the glance with a slow grin which had in it a quality of that subtleness she had noticed in him before. A shiver of trepidation ran over her. But she sat rigid in the saddle, determined she would not be afraid of him. For the exchange of talk between them, and his considerate manner—everything about him—had convinced her that he was much like other men—men who respect women.

"There is no evidence that father made you promise to go to the Rancho Seco."

"There wasn't no evidence that I made any promise to keep that man Deveny from herd-ridin' you," he said shortly, with a grin. "I'm sure goin' to the Rancho Seco."

"Suppose I should not wish it—what then?"

"I'd keep right on headin' for there—keepin' my promise."

"Do you always keep your promises?" she asked, mockery in her voice.

"When I make 'em. Usually, I don't do any promisin'. But when I do—that promise is goin' to be kept. If you ain't likin' my company, ma'am, why, I reckon there's a heap of trail ahead. An' I ain't afraid of gettin' lost."

"Isn't that remarkable!" she jeered.

He looked at her with sober eyes. "If we're figurin' on hittin' the Rancho Seco before night we'll have to quit our gassin' an' do some travelin'," he advised. "Accordin' to the figures we've got about forty miles to ride, altogether. We've come about fifteen—an'," he looked at a silver watch which he drew from a pocket, "it's pretty near two now."

Without further words—for it seemed useless to argue the point upon which he was so obviously determined—Barbara urged Billy on, taking the lead.

For more than an hour she maintained the lead, riding a short distance in advance, and seemingly paying no attention to Harlan. Yet she noted that he kept about the same distance from her always—though she never permitted him to observe that she watched him, for her backward glances were taken out of the corners of her eyes, when she pretended to be looking at the country on one side or the other.

Harlan, however, noted the glances. And his lips curved into a faint grin as he rode. Once when he

had dropped behind a little farther than usual, he leaned over and whispered into Purgatory's ear:

"She's sure ignorin' us, ain't she, you black son-of-a-gun! She ain't looked back here more'n three times in the last five minutes!"

And yet Harlan's jocular mood did not endure long. During those intervals in which Barbara kept her gaze straight ahead on the trail, Harlan regarded her with a grave intentness that betrayed the soberness of his thoughts.

In all his days he had seen no woman like her; and when she had come toward him in Lamo, with Higgins close behind her, he had been so astonished that he had momentarily forgotten Deveny and all the rest of them.

Women of the kind he had met had never affected him as Barbara had affected him. He had still a mental picture of her as she had come toward him, with her hair flying in a golden-brown mass over her shoulders; her wide, fear-lighted eyes seeking his with an expression of appeal so eloquent that it had sent a queer, thrilling, protective sensation over him.

And as she rode ahead of him it was the picture she had made *then* that he saw; and the emotions that assailed him were the identical emotions that had beset him when for a brief instant, in Lamo, he had held her in his arms, with her head resting on his shoulder.

That, he felt, had been the real Barbara Morgan. Her manner now — the constrained and distant pose she had adopted, her suspicions, her indignation — all those were outward manifestations of the reaction that

had seized her. The real Barbara Morgan was she who had run to him for protection and she would always be to him as she had appeared then — a soft, yielding, trembling girl who, at a glance had trusted him enough to run straight into his arms.

CHAPTER IX

AN UNWELCOME GUEST

IT WAS late afternoon when Barbara and Harlan — the girl still riding a little in advance of the man — rode their horses out of a stretch of broken country featured by low, barren hills and ragged draws, and came to the edge of a vast level of sage and mesquite that stretched southward an interminable distance.

The sun was low — a flaming red disk that swam in a sea of ever-changing color between the towering peaks of two mighty mountains miles westward — and the sky above the big level upon which Barbara and Harlan rode was a pale amethyst set in the dull gray frame of the dusk that was rising from the southern and eastern horizons.

Eastward the gray was pierced by the burning, flaming prismatic streaks that stretched straight from the cleft in the mountains where the sun was sinking — the sun seemed to be sending floods of new color into the streaks as he went, deepening those that remained; tinging it all with harmonious tones — rose and pearl and violet and saffron blending them with a giant, magic brush — recreating them, making the whole background of amethyst sky glow like a huge jewel touched by the myriad colors of a mighty rainbow.

The trail taken by Barbara Morgan ran now, in a southeasterly direction, and it seemed to Harlan that they were riding straight into the folds of a curtain of

gauze. For a haze was rising into the effulgent expanse of color, and the sun's rays, striking it, wrought their magic upon it.

Harlan, accustomed to sunsets — with a matter-of-fact attitude toward all of nature's phenomena — caught himself admiring this one. So intent was he that he looked around with a start when Purgatory halted, to find that Barbara had drawn Billy down and was sitting in the saddle close to him, watching him, her eyes luminous with an emotion that thrilled Harlan strangely.

"This is the most beautiful place in the world," she declared in a voice that seemed to quaver with awe.

"It's sure a beauty," agreed Harlan. "I've been in a heap of places where they had sunsets, but dump 'em all together an' they wouldn't make an edge on this display. She's sure a hummer!"

The girl's eyes seemed to leap at his praise.

"I never want to leave this place," she said. "There is nothing like it. Those two mountains that you see far out into the west — where the sun is going down — are about forty miles distant. If you will notice, you can see that there are other mountains — much smaller — connected with them. They are two small ranges, and they melt into the plains there — and there."

She pointed to the south and to the north, where the two ranges, seemingly extending straight westward, merged into the edge of the big level where Barbara and Harlan sat on their horses.

The two ranges were perhaps a dozen miles apart, separated by a low level valley through which ran a

narrow river, its surface glowing like burnished gold in the rays of the sinking sun.

Gazing westward — straight into the glow — Harlan noted the virgin wildness of the immense valley. It lay, serene, slumberous; its salient features — ridges, low hills, rocky promontories and wooded slopes — touched by the rose tints that descended upon them; while in the depressions reigned purple shadows, soft-toned, blending perfectly with the brighter colors.

With the sunset glow upon it; with the bastioned hills — barren at their peaks, ridged and seamed — looming clear and definite above the vast expanse of green, the colossal valley stretched, with no movement in it or above it — in a vacuum-like stillness that might have reigned over the world on the dawn of creation's first morning.

Harlan looked covertly at Barbara. The girl's face was pale, and her eyes were glowing with a light that made him draw a long breath of sympathy and understanding. But it had been many years since he had felt the thrill of awe that she was experiencing at this minute.

He knew that presently the spell would pass, and that material things would exact their due. And the resulting contrast between the beauty of the picture upon which she was gazing, and the solemn realization of loss that memory would bring, instantly, would almost crush her.

Therefore he spoke seriously when he caught her looking at him.

"There's sunsets *an'* sunsets," he said. "They tell

me that they're a heap common in some parts of the world. Wyoming, now — Wyoming prides herself on sunsets. An' I've heard they have 'em in Italy, an' France — an' some more of them foreign places — where guys go to look at 'em. But it's always seemed to me that there ain't a heap of sense in gettin' fussed up over a sunset. The sun has got his work to do; an' he does it without any fussin'. An' they tell me that it's the same sun that sets in all them places I've been tellin' you about.

"Well, it's always been my idee that the sun ain't got no compliments due him — he'll set mighty beautiful — sometimes; an' folks will get awed an' thrilly over him. But the next day — if a man happens to be ridin' in the desert, where there ain't any water, he'll cuss the sun pretty thorough — forgettin' the nice things he said about it once."

Barbara scowled at him.

"You haven't a bit of poetry in your soul!" she charged. "I'm sorry we stopped to look at the valley or the sun — or anything. You don't — you can't appreciate the beautiful!"

He was silent as she urged Billy onward. And as they fled southwestward, with Purgatory far behind, Harlan swept his hat from his head and bowed toward the mighty valley, saying lowly:

"You're sure a hummer — an' no mistake. But if a man had any poetry in his soul — why ——"

He rode on, gulping his delight over having accomplished what he had intended to accomplish.

"She'll be givin' it to me pretty regular; an' she

won't have time for no solemn thoughts. They'll come later, though, when she gets to the Rancho Seco."

It was the lowing of cattle that at last brought to Harlan the conviction that they were near the Rancho Seco — that and the sight of the roofs of some buildings that presently came into view.

But they had been riding for half an hour before they came upon the cattle and buildings, and the flaming colors had faded into somber gray tones. The filmy dusk that precedes darkness was beginning to settle over the land; and into the atmosphere had come that solemn hush with which the wide, open places greet the night.

Barbara had no further word to say to Harlan until they reached a group of buildings that were scattered on a big level near a river. They had passed a long stretch of wire fence, which Harlan suspected, enclosed a section of land reserved for a pasture; and the girl brought her pony to a halt in front of an adobe building near a high rail fence.

"This is the Rancho Seco," she said shortly. "This is the stable. Over there is the ranchhouse. Evidently the men are all away somewhere."

She got off the pony, removed the saddle and bridle, carried them into the stable, came out again, and opened a gate in the fence, through which she sent "Billy." Then she closed the gate and turned to Harlan, who had dismounted and was standing at Purgatory's head.

"I thank you for what you have done for me," she said, coldly. "And now, I should like to know just

what you purpose to do — and why you have come."

Harlan's eyes narrowed as he returned her gaze. He remembered Lane Morgan's words: "John Haydon is dead stuck on Barbara;" and he had wondered ever since the meeting in Lamo if Barbara returned Haydon's affection, or if she trusted Haydon enough to confide in him.

Barbara's attitude toward Haydon would affect Harlan's attitude toward the girl. For if she loved Haydon, or trusted him enough to confide in him — or even to communicate with him concerning ordinary details, Harlan could not apprise her of the significance of his presence at the Rancho Seco.

For Haydon was unknown to Harlan and Harlan was not inclined to accept Morgan's praise of him as conclusive evidence of the man's worthiness. Besides, Morgan had qualified his instructions with: "Take a look at John Haydon, an' if you think he's on the level — an' you want to drift on — turn things over to him."

Harlan did not want to "drift on." Into his heart since his meeting in Lamo with Barbara — and during the ride to the Rancho Seco — had grown a decided reluctance toward "drifting." And not even the girl's scorn could have forced him to leave her at the ranch, unprotected.

But he could not tell her why he could not go. Despite her protests he must remain — at least until he was able to determine the character of John Haydon.

A gleam of faint mockery came into his eyes as he looked at Barbara.

"I'm keepin' my promise to your dad—I'm stayin' at the Rancho Seco because he told me to stay. He wanted me to sort of look out that nothin' happened to you. I reckon we'll get along."

The girl caught her breath sharply. In the growing darkness Harlan's smile seemed to hold an evil significance; it seemed to express a thought that took into consideration the loneliness of the surroundings, the fact that she was alone, and that she was helpless. More—it seemed to be a presumptuous smile, insinuating, full of dire promise.

For Harlan was an outlaw—she could not forget that! He bore a reputation for evil that had made him feared wherever men congregated; and as she watched him it seemed to her that his face betrayed signs of his ruthlessness, his recklessness, and his readiness for violence of every kind.

He might not have killed her father—Rogers and Lawson had acquitted him of that. But he might be lying about the promise to her father merely for the purpose of providing an excuse to come to the Rancho Seco. It seemed to her that if her father had really exacted a promise from him he would have written to her, or sent her some token to prove the genuineness of it. There was no visible evidence of Harlan's truthfulness.

"Do you mean to say you are going to stay here—indefinitely?" she demanded, her voice a little hoarse from the fright that was stealing over her.

He smiled at her. "You've hit it about right, ma'am."

"I don't want you to stay here!" she declared, angrily.

"I'm stayin', ma'am." His smile faded, and his eyes became serious — earnest.

"Later on — when things shape themselves up — I'll tell you why I'm stayin'. But just now ——"

She shrank from him, incredulous, a growing fear plain in her eyes. And before he could finish what he intended to say she had wheeled, and was running toward the ranchhouse.

He watched until she vanished through an open doorway; he heard the door slam, and caught the sound of bars being hurriedly dropped into place. And after that he stood for a time watching the house. No light came from within, and no other sound.

He frowned slightly, drawing a mental picture of the girl inside, yielding to the terror that had seized her. Then after a while he walked down along the corral fence until he came to another building — a bunkhouse. And for a long time he stood in the doorway of the building, watching the ranchhouse, afflicted with grim sympathy.

"It ain't so damn' cheerful, at that," he mused. "I reckon she thinks she's landed into trouble with both feet — with her dad cashin' in like he did, an' Deveny after her. It sure must be pretty hard to consider all them things. An' on top of that I mosey along, with a reputation as a no-good son-of-a-gun, an' scare the wits out of her with my homely mug. An' I can't tell her why she hadn't ought to be scared. I call that mighty mean."

CHAPTER X

ON GUARD

THE man whose soul held no love of the poetic sat for two or three hours on the threshold of the bunkhouse door, his gaze on the ranchhouse. He was considering his "reputation," and he had reached the conclusion that Barbara Morgan had reason to fear him — if rumor's tongues had related to her all of the crimes that had been attributed to him. And he knew she must have heard a great many tales about him, for rumor is a tireless worker.

And for the first time in his life Harlan regretted that he had permitted rumor to weave her fabric of lies. For not one of the stories that luridly portrayed him in the rôle of a ruthless killer and outlaw was true.

It was easy enough for him to understand how he had gained that reputation. He grinned mirthlessly now, as he mentally reviewed a past which *had* been rather like the record of a professional man-killer. And yet, reviewing his past — from the day about five years ago, when he had shot a Taos bully who had drawn a gun on him with murderous intent, until today, when he had sent Laskar to his death — he could not remember one shooting affray for which he could be blamed. As a matter of fact, he had — by the courts in some instances, and by witnesses in others, where there were no courts — been held blameless.

There had been men who had seen Harlan draw his

weapons with deadly intent — men who insisted that the man's purpose was plain, to goad an enemy to draw a weapon, permitting him partially to draw it, and then to depend upon his superior swiftness and unerring aim. And this theory of Harlan's character had gone abroad.

And because the theory had been accepted, Harlan's name became associated with certain crimes which are inseparable from the type of character which the popular imagination had given him. Strangers — criminals — in certain towns in the Territory and out of it must have heard with considerable satisfaction that their depredations had been charged to Harlan. Only once had Harlan been able to refute the charge of rumor. That was when, having passed a night in the company of Dave Hallowell, the marshal of Pardo, word was brought by a stage-driver that "Drag" Harlan had killed a man in Dry Bottom — a town two hundred miles north — and that Harlan had escaped, though a posse had been on his trail.

Even when the driver was confronted by Harlan in the flesh he was doubtful, surrendering grudgingly, as though half convinced that Harlan had been able to transport himself over the distance from Dry Bottom to Pardo by some magic not mentioned.

So it had gone. But the terrible record of evil deeds attributed to Harlan had not affected him greatly. In the beginning — when he had killed the Taos bully — he had been relucant to take life; and he had avoided, as much as possible, company in which he would be forced to kill to protect himself.

And through it all he had been able to maintain his poise, his self-control. The reputation he had achieved would have ruined some men — would have filled them with an ambition to fulfil the specifications of the mythical terror men thought him. There was a danger there; Harlan had felt it. There was a certain satisfaction in being pointed out as a man with whom other men dared not trifle; respect of a fearsome equality was granted him — he had seen it in the eyes of men, as he had seen an awed adulation in the eyes of women.

He had felt them all — all the emotions that a real desperado could feel. He had experienced the impulse to swagger, to pose — really to live the part that his ill-fame had given him.

But he had resisted those impulses; and the glow in his eyes when in the presence of men who feared him was not the passion to kill, but a humorous contempt of all men who abased themselves before him.

On the night he had been with Dave Hallowell, the marshal of Pardo, he had listened with steady interest to a story told him by the latter. It concerned the Lamo region and the great basin at which he and Barbara Morgan had been looking when the girl had accused him of a lack of poetic feeling.

"I've heard reports about Sunset Valley," Hallowell had said, squinting his eyes at Harlan. "I've met Sheriff Gage two or three times, an' he's had somethin' to say about it. Accordin' to Gage, everything ain't on the surface over there; there's somethin' behind all that robbin' an' stealin' that's goin' on. There's some-

thin' big, but it's hid — an' no man ain't ever been able to find out what it is. But it's somethin'.

"In the first place, Deveny's gang ain't never been heard of as pullin' off anything anywheres else but in Sunset Valley. As for that, there's plenty of room in the valley for them without gettin' out of it. But it seems they'd get out once in a while. They don't — they stay right in the valley, or close around it. Seems to me they've got a grudge ag'in' them Sunset Valley ranchers, an' are workin' it off.

"Why? That question has got Gage guessin'. It's got everybody guessin'. Stock is bein' run off in big bunches; men is bein' murdered without no cause; no man is able to get any money in or out of the valley — an' they're doin' other things that is makin' the cattlemen feel nervous an' flighty.

"They've scared one man out — a Pole named Launski — from the far end. He pulled stakes an' hit the breeze runnin' sellin' out for a song to a guy named Haydon. I seen Launski when he clumb on the Lamo stage, headin' this way, an' he sure was a heap relieved to get out with a whole skin."

Hallowell talked long, and the mystery that seemed to surround Sunset Valley appealed to Harlan's imagination. Yet he did not reveal his interest to Hallowell until the latter mentioned Barbara Morgan. Then his eyes glowed, and he leaned closer to the marshal.

And when Hallowell remarked that Lane Morgan, of the Rancho Seco had declared he would give half his ranch to a trust-worthy man who could be depended

upon to "work his guns" in the interest of the Morgan family, the slow tensing of Harlan's muscles might have betrayed the man's emotions — for Hallowell grinned faintly.

Hallowell had said more. But he did not say that word had come to him from Sheriff Gage — an appeal, rather — to the effect that Morgan had sent to him for such a man, and that Gage had transmitted the appeal to Hallowell. Hallowell thought he knew Harlan, and he was convinced that if he told Harlan flatly that Morgan wanted to employ him for that definite purpose, Harlan would refuse.

And so Hallowell had gone about his work obliquely. He knew Harlan more intimately than he knew any other man in the country; and he was aware that the chivalric impulse was stronger in Harlan than in any man he knew.

And he was aware, too, that Harlan was scrupulously honest and square, despite the evil structure which had been built around him by rumor. He had watched Harlan for years, and knew him for exactly what he was — an imaginative, reckless, impulsive spirit who faced danger with the steady, unwavering eye of complete unconcern.

As Hallowell had talked of the Rancho Seco he had seen Harlan's eyes gleam; seen his lips curve with a faint smile in which there was a hint of waywardness. And so Hallowell knew he had scattered his words on fertile mental soil.

And yet Harlan would not have taken the trail that led to the Rancho Seco had not the killing of his

friend, Davey Langan, followed closely upon the story related to him by the marshal.

Harlan had ridden eastward, to Lazette — a matter of two hundred miles — trailing a herd of cattle from the T Down — the ranch where he and Langan were employed.

When he returned he heard the story of the killing of his friend by Dolver and another man, not identified, but who rode a horse branded with the L Bar M — which was the Rancho Seco brand.

It was Hallowell who broke the news of the murder to Harlan, together with the story of his pursuit of Dolver and the other man, and of his failure to capture them.

There was no thought of romance in Harlan's mind when he mounted Purgatory to take up Dolver's trail; and when he came upon Dolver at Sentinel Rock — and later, until he had talked with Lane Morgan — he had no thought of offering himself to Morgan, to become that trustworthy man who would "work his guns" for the Rancho Seco owner.

But after he had questioned Laskar — and had felt that Laskar was not the accomplice of Dolver in the murder of Langan — he had determined to go to the ranch, and had told Morgan of his determination.

Now, sitting on the threshold of the Rancho Seco bunkhouse, he realized that his talk with Morgan had brought him here in a different rôle than he had anticipated.

From where he sat he had a good view of all the buildings — low, flat-roofed adobe structures, scattered

on the big level with no regard for system, apparently — erected as the needs of a growing ranch required. Yet all were well kept and substantial, indicating that Lane Morgan had been a man who believed in neatness and permanency.

The ranchhouse was the largest of the buildings. It was two stories high on the side fronting the slope that led to the river, and another section — in what appeared to be the rear, facing the bunkhouse, also had a second story — a narrow, boxlike, frowning section which had the appearance of a blockhouse on the parapet wall of a fort.

And that, Harlan divined, was just what it had been built for — for defensive purposes. For the entire structure bore the appearance of age, and the style of its architecture was an imitation of the Spanish type. It was evident that Lane Morgan had considered the warlike instincts of wandering bands of Apache Indians when he had built his house.

The walls connecting the fortlike section in the rear with the two-story front were about ten feet in height, with few windows; and the entire structure was built in a huge square, with an inner court — or *patio,* reached by an entrance that penetrated the lower center of the two-story section in front.

Harlan's interest centered heavily upon the ranchhouse, for it was there that Barbara Morgan had hidden herself, fearing him.

She had entered a door that opened in the wall directly beneath the fortlike second story, and it was upon this door that Harlan's gaze was fixed. He

smiled wryly, for sight of the door brought Barbara into his thoughts — though he was not sure she had been out of them since the first instant of his meeting with her in Lamo.

"They've been tellin' her them damn stories about me bein' a hell-raiser — an' she believes 'em," he mused. And then his smile faded. "An she ain't none reassured by my mug."

But it was upon the incident of his meeting with Barbara, and the odd coincidence of his coming upon her father at Sentinel Rock, that his thoughts dwelt longest.

It was odd — that meeting at Sentinel Rock. And yet not so odd, either, considering everything.

For he had been coming to the Rancho Seco. Before he had reached Sentinel Rock he had been determined to begin his campaign against the outlaws at the Rancho Seco. It was his plan to ask Morgan for a job, and to spend as much of his time as possible in getting information about Deveny and his men, in the hope of learning the identity of the man who had assisted in the murder of Langan.

What was odd about the incident was that Morgan should attempt to cross to Pardo to have his gold assayed at just about the time Harlan had decided to begin his trip to the Rancho Seco.

Harlan smiled as his gaze rested on the ranchhouse. He was glad he had met Lane Morgan; he was glad he had headed straight for Lamo after leaving Morgan. For by going straight to Lamo he had been able to balk Deveny's evil intentions toward the girl

who, in the house now, was so terribly afraid of him.

He had told Morgan why he was headed toward the Rancho Seco section, but he had communicated to Morgan that information only because he had wanted to cheer the man in his last moments. That was what had made Morgan's face light up as his life had ebbed away. And Harlan's eyes glowed now with the recollection.

"The damned cuss—how he did brighten up!" he mused. "He sure was a heap tickled to know that the deck wasn't all filled with dirty deuces."

And then Harlan's thoughts went again to Lamo, and to the picture Barbara had made running toward him. It seemed to him that he could still feel her in his arms, and a great regret that she distrusted him assailed him.

He had sat for a long time on the threshold of the bunkhouse door, and after a time he noted that the moon was swimming high, almost overhead. He got up, unhurriedly, and again walked to the stable door, looking in at Purgatory. For Harlan did not intend to sleep tonight; he had resolved, since the Rancho Seco seemed to be deserted except for his and Barbara's presence, to guard the ranchhouse.

For he knew that the passions of Deveny for the girl were thoroughly aroused. He had seen in Deveny's eyes there in Lamo a flame—when Deveny looked at Barbara—that told him more about the man's passions than Deveny himself suspected. He grinned coldly as he leaned easily against the stable door; for men of the Deveny type always aroused

him — their personality had always seemed to strike discord into his soul; had always fanned into flame the smoldering hatred he had of such men; had always brought into his heart those savage impulses which he had sometimes felt when he was on the verge of yielding to the urge to become what men had thought him — and what they still thought him — a conscienceless killer.

His smile now was bitter with the hatred that was in his heart for Deveny — for Deveny had cast longing, lustful eyes upon Barbara Morgan — and the smile grew into a sneer as he drew out paper and tobacco and began to roll a cigarette.

But as he rolled the cigarette his fingers stiffened; the paper and the tobacco in it dropped into the dust at his feet; and he stiffened, his lips straightening, his eyes flaming with rage, his muscles tensing.

For a horseman had appeared from out of the moonlit haze beyond the river. Rigid in the doorway — standing back a little so that he might not be seen — Harlan watched the man.

The latter brought his horse to a halt when he reached the far corner of the ranchhouse, dismounted, and stole stealthily along the wall of the building.

Harlan was not more than a hundred feet distant, and the glare of the moonlight shining full on the man as he paused before the door into which Barbara Morgan had gone, revealed him plainly to Harlan.

The man was Meeder Lawson. Harlan's lips wreathed into a grin of cold contempt. He stepped quickly to Purgatory, drew his rifle from its saddle

sheath and returned to the doorway. And there, standing in the shadows, he watched Lawson as the latter tried the door and, failing to open it, left it and crept along the wall of the building, going toward a window.

The window also was fastened, it seemed, for Lawson stole away from it after a time and continued along the wall of the house until he reached the southeast corner. Around that, after a fleeting glance about him, Lawson vanished.

Still grinning — though there was now a quality in the grin that might have warned Lawson, had he seen it — Harlan stepped down from the doorway, slipped into the shadow of the corral fence, and made his way toward the corner where Lawson had disappeared.

CHAPTER XI

THE INTRUDER

AFTER closing the door through which she had entered, Barbara Morgan slipped the fastenings into place and stood, an ear pressed against the door, listening for sounds that would tell her Harlan had followed her. But beyond the door all was silence.

Breathing fast, yielding to the panic of fear that had seized her, over the odd light she had seen in Harlan's eyes — a gleam, that to her, seemed to have been a reflection of some evil passion in the man's heart — she ran through the dark room she had entered, opened a door that led to the *patio,* and peered fearfully outward, as though she half expected to see Harlan there.

But the court was deserted, apparently, though there were somber shadows ranging the enclosing walls that would afford concealment for Harlan, had he succeeded in gaining entrance. As she stepped out of the doorway she peered intently around.

Then, further frightened by the brooding silence that seemed to envelop the place, and tortured by tragic thoughts in which her father occupied a prominent position — almost crazed by the memory of what had happened during the preceding twenty-four hours — she fled across the *patio* swiftly, her terror growing with each step.

She knew the house thoroughly; she could have

found her way in complete darkness; and when she reached the opposite side of the court she almost threw herself at a door which, she knew, opened into the big room in which she and her father had usually passed their leisure.

Entering, she closed the door, and barred it. Then, feeling more secure, she stood for an instant in the center of the room, gazing about, afflicted with an appalling sense of loss, of loneliness, and of helplessness.

For this was the first time she had entered the house since the news of her father's death had reached her; and she missed him, feeling more keenly than ever the grief she had endured thus far with a certain stoic calm; yielding to the tears that had been very close for hours.

She did not light the kerosene lamp that stood on a big center table in the room. For there was light enough for her to see objects around her; and she went at last to an arm-chair which had been her father's favorite, knelt beside it, and sobbed convulsively.

Later, yielding to a dull apathy which had stolen over her, she made her way upstairs, to her room — which was directly over the front entrance to the *patio* — and sank into a chair beside one of the windows.

She had locked her door after entering; and for the first time since arriving at the Rancho Seco she felt comparatively safe.

Her thoughts were incoherent — a queer jumble of mental impulses which seemed to lead her always back

to the harrowing realization that she had lost her father. That was the gigantic axis around which her whole mental structure revolved. It was staggering, stupefying, and her brain reeled under it.

Other thoughts came, flickered like feeble lights, and went out — thoughts of what had happened to her at Lamo; a dull wonder over Meeder Lawson's presence in town when he should have been with the men on the range; speculation as to the whereabouts of the men — why none of them had remained at the ranch-house; and a sort of dumb, vague wonder over what her future would be.

She thought, too, of John Haydon of the Star ranch — the big, smiling, serene-eyed man who seemed to bring a breath of romance with him each time he visited the Rancho Seco. Haydon would help her, she knew, and she would go to him in the morning.

Her father had trusted Haydon, and she would trust him. Haydon was the one man in the section who seemed to have no fear of Deveny and his men — many times he had told her that most of the stories told of Deveny's crimes were untrue — that he had not committed all those that were attributed to him.

Not that Haydon condoned those offenses upon which Deveny stood convicted by circumstantial evidence. Nor had Haydon ever sought to defend Deveny. On the other hand, Haydon's condemnation of the outlaw and his men had been vigorous — almost too vigorous for Haydon's safety, she had heard her father say.

It was when her thoughts dwelt upon Harlan that

she was most puzzled—and impressed. For though she was acquainted with the man's reputation—knowing him to be an outlaw of the reckless, dare-devil type—she felt the force of him, the compelling originality of him—as he differed from the outlaw of popular conception—his odd personality, which seemed to be a mingling of the elements of character embracing both good and evil.

For though an outlaw, himself, he had protected her from outlaws. And she had seen in his eyes certain expressions that told her that he felt impulses of sympathy and of tenderness. And his words to Deveny and others had seemed to hint of a fairly high honorableness.

And though she had seen in his eyes a cold gleam that was convincing evidence of the presence of those ruthless passions which had made him an enemy of the law, she had also detected expressions in his eyes that told plainly of genial humor, of gentleness, and of consideration for other humans.

But whatever she had seen in him, she felt his force—the terrible power of him when aroused. It was in the atmosphere that surrounded him; it was in the steady gleam of his eyes, in the poise of his head, and in the thrust of his jaw, all around him. She feared him, yet he fascinated her—compelled her—seemed to insist that she consider him in her scheme of life.

In fact, he had made it plain to her that he intended to be considered. "I'm stayin' here," he had told her in his slow, deliberate way.

And that seemed to end it—she knew he *would*

stay; that he was determined, and that nothing short of force would dissuade him. And what force could she bring against him? A man whose name, mentioned in the presence of other men, made their faces blanch.

Deep in her heart, though, lurked a conviction that Harlan had not told her everything that had happened at Sentinel Rock. She was afflicted with a suspicion that he was holding something back. She had seen that in his eyes, too, she thought. It seemed to her that her father *might* have told him to come to the Rancho Seco, and to stay there. And for that reason — because she suspected that Harlan had not told all he knew — she felt that she ought not order him away. If only he had not looked at her with that queer, insinuating smile!

She had sat at the window for, it seemed to her, many hours before she became aware that the moon had risen and was directly overhead, flooding the ground in the vicinity of the ranchhouse with a soft, silver radiance.

She got up with a start, remembering that she had left Harlan standing outside the door in the rear. She had almost forgotten that!

She went to a window that opened into the *patio,* and looked downward. Every nook and corner of the *patio* was visible now; the dark, somber shadows had been driven away, and in the silvery flood that poured down from above the enclosure was brilliant, clearly defined — and deserted.

And yet as the girl looked, a presentiment of evil assailed her, whitening her cheeks and widening her

eyes. The quiet peace and tranquillity of the *patio* seemed to mock her; she felt that it held a sinister promise, a threat of dire things to come.

The feeling was so strong that it drove her back from the window to the center of the room, where she stood, holding her breath, her hands clasped in front of her, the fingers twining stiffly. It seemed to her that she was waiting—waiting for something to happen—something that threatened.

And when she heard a slight sound, seeming to arise from the room below her, she caught her breath with a gasp of horror.

But she did not move. She stood there, with no breath issuing from between her lips, for many minutes, it seemed—waiting, dreading, a cold paralysis stealing over her.

And then again it came—an odd sound—slow, creaking, seeming to come always nearer. It was not until she heard the sound directly outside her door that she realized that what she heard was a step on the stairs. And then, convinced that Harlan had gained entrance, she slipped noiselessly across the room to the front wall, where she took down a heavy pistol that hung from a wooden peg.

With the huge weapon in hand she returned to a point near the center of the room, and with bated breath and glowing, determined eyes, faced the door.

And when, after a time, she heard the door creak with a weight that seemed to be against it—after she saw it give; heard the lock break, and saw a man's form darken the opening as the door was flung wide—

she pressed the trigger of the weapon once — twice — three times — in rapid succession.

She heard the man curse, saw him catch at his chest, and tumble headlong toward her. And she fired again, thinking he was trying to grasp her.

She laughed hysterically when she saw him sink to the floor and stretch out with a queer inertness. Then, swaying, her brain reeling with the horror of the thing, she managed to get to the bed at the other side of the room. When she reached it she collapsed gently, a long, convulsive shudder running over her.

CHAPTER XII

BARBARA SEES A LIGHT

WHEN Barbara regained consciousness it was with a gasp of horror over the realization of what had happened. She stiffened immediately, however, and lay, straining at the dread paralysis that had gripped her; for she saw Harlan standing at her side, looking down into her face, his own set in a grim smile.

She must have fainted again, for it seemed to her that a long period of time elapsed until she again became conscious of her surroundings. Harlan had moved off a little, though he was still watching her with the grimly humorous expression.

She sat up, staring wildly at him; then shrank back, getting as far away from him as she could.

"You!" she gasped, "You! Didn't I——"

He interrupted her, drawling his words a little:

"The guy you shot was Lawson. You bored him a heap. I've toted him downstairs. He's plenty dead. It was plumb good shootin'—for a woman."

His words shocked her to action, and she got up and walked around the foot of the bed, from where she could see the spot where the intruder must have fallen after she had shot him. A dark stain showed on the floor where the man had lain, and the sight of it sent her a step backward, so that she struck the foot of the bed. She caught at the bed and grasped one

of the posts, holding tightly to it while she looked Harlan over with dreading, incredulous eyes.

"It—it wasn't *you!*" she demanded. "Are you sure?"

He smiled and said, slowly and consolingly: "I reckon if you'd shot *me* I'd be knowin' it. Don't take it so hard, ma'am. Why, if a man goes to breakin' into a woman's room that way he sure ain't fit to go on livin' in a world where there *is* a woman."

"It was Lawson—you say? Meeder Lawson—the Rancho Seco foreman? I thought—why, I thought it was you!"

"I'm thankin' you, ma'am," he said, ironically. "But if you'll just stick your head out of that window, you'll see it was Lawson, right enough. He's layin' right below the window."

She did as bidden, and she saw Lawson lying on the ground beneath the window, flat on his back, his face turned upward with the radiant moonlight shining full upon his wide-open, staring eyes.

Barbara glanced swiftly, and then drew back into the room, shuddering.

Harlan stood, silently regarding her, while she walked again to the bed and sat upon it, staring out into the flood of moonlight, her face ghastly, her hands hanging limply at her sides.

She had killed a man. And though there was justification for the deed, she could not fight down the shivering horror that had seized her, the overpowering and terrible knowledge that she had taken human life.

She sat on the edge of the bed for a long time, and

Harlan said no word to her, standing motionless, his arms folded, one hand slowly caressing his chin, as he watched her.

After a time, drawing a long, shuddering breath, she looked up at him.

"How did you know—what made you come—here?" she asked.

"I wasn't reckonin' to sleep tonight—havin' thoughts—about things," he said. "I was puttin' in a heap of my time settin' in the doorway of the bunkhouse, wonderin' what had made you so scared of me. While I was tryin' to figure it out I saw Lawson comin'. There was somethin' in his actions which didn't jibe with my ideas of square dealin', an' so I kept lookin' at him. An' when I saw him prowlin' around, tryin' to open doors an' windows, why, I just naturally trailed him. An' I found the window he opened. I reckon that's all."

She got up, swaying a little, a wan smile on her face that reflected her astonishment and wonder over the way she had jumbled things. For this man—the man she had feared when she had left him standing outside the door some hours before—had been eager to protect her from the other, who had attacked her. He had been waiting, watching.

Moreover, there was in Harlan's eyes as he stood in the room a considerate, deferential gleam that told her more than words could have conveyed to her—a something that convinced her that he was not the type of man she had thought him.

The knowledge filled her with a strange delight.

There was relief in her eyes, and her voice was almost steady when she again spoke to him:

"Harlan," she said, "did father really send you here? Did he make you promise to come?"

"I reckon he did, ma'am," he said.

For an instant she looked fairly at him, intently searching his eyes for indications of untruthfulness. Then she drew a long breath of conviction.

"I believe you," she said.

Harlan swept his hat from his head. He bowed, and there was an odd leap in his voice:

"That tickles me a heap, ma'am. I don't know when I've heard anything that pleased me more."

He backed away from her until he reached the doorway. And she saw his eyes — wide and eloquent — even in the subdued light of the doorway.

"I'd go to sleep now, ma'am, if I was you. You need it a heap. It's been a long day for you — an' things ain't gone just right. I don't reckon there'll be anybody botherin' you any more tonight."

"And you?" she asked, "won't you try to get some sleep, too?"

He laughed, telling her that he would "ketch a wink or two." Then he turned and went down the stairs — she could hear him as he opened a lower door and went out.

Looking out of the window an instant later, she saw him taking Lawson's body away. And still later, hearing a sound outside, she stole to the window again.

Below, seated on the threshold of the door that led into the room she had entered when she had crossed

the *patio,* she saw Harlan. He was smoking a cigarette, leaning against the door jamb in an attitude of complete relaxation.

There was something in his manner that comforted her — a calm confidence, a slow ease of movement as he fingered his cigarette that indicated perfect tranquility — an atmosphere of peace that could not have surrounded him had he meditated any evil whatever.

She knew, now, that she had misjudged him. For he had made no attempt to take advantage of her loneliness and helplessness. And whatever his reputation — whatever the crimes he had committed against the laws — he had been a gentleman in his attitude toward her. That feature of his conduct dominated her thoughts as she stretched out on the bed, it was her last coherent thought as she went to sleep.

CHAPTER XIII

HARLAN TAKES CHARGE

BARBARA could not have told why she had not acted upon her determination to ride westward to the Star ranch to acquaint John Haydon with the predicament into which the events of the past few hours had plunged her. She could not have explained why she permitted the first day — after Harlan's coming — to pass without going to see Haydon, any more than she could have explained why she permitted many other days to pass in the same manner.

She was almost convinced, though, that it was because of the manner in which Harlan took charge of the ranch — the capable and business-like way he had of treating the men.

For the outfit came in late in the afternoon following the night which had marked the death of Lawson — the straw-boss explaining that he had received explicit orders from Lawson to "work" a grass level several miles down the river.

One other reason for Barbara's failure to ride to the Star — a reason that she did not permit to dwell prominently in her thoughts — was resentment.

She had permitted the first day to pass without going to see Haydon. But when it had gone and another day dawned without Haydon coming to see *her,* she felt that he was deliberately absenting himself. For certainly he must have heard what had happened,

and if he thought as much of her as he had led her to believe he would have come to her instantly.

Had Haydon seen the defiant gleam of her eyes when she gazed westward — in the direction of the Star — he might have realized that each day he stayed away from the Rancho Seco would make it that much more difficult for him to explain.

Barbara stayed indoors much of the time during the first days of Harlan's control of the ranch, but from the windows she saw him — noted that the men obeyed him promptly and without question.

A sense of loss, of emptiness, still afflicted the girl, and yet through it all there ran a thrill of satisfaction, of assurance that the steady-eyed man who had saved her from Deveny, and who had treated her like a courtier of old on the night she had killed Lawson, seemed to have her welfare in mind, seemed — despite the reputation the people of the country had given him — to have constituted himself her guardian, without expectation of reward of the kind she had feared he sought.

Harlan's method of assuming control of the Rancho Seco had been direct and simple. When the twenty-seven men of the outfit had straggled into the yard surrounding the big corral — the chuck-wagon, bearing the cook and his assistant, trailing a little behind, and followed by the horses of the *remuda* with the wrangler hurling vitriolic language in the rear — Harlan was standing beside Purgatory near the corral fence in front of one of the bunkhouses.

He had paid — apparently — no attention to the

ıen as they dismounted, unsaddled, and turned their orses into the corral, and he did not even look at the elligerent-eyed cook whose sardonic glance roved over im.

But the men of the outfit watched him out of the orners of their eyes; as they passed him to go to the unkhouses, they shot inquiring, speculating glances at ne another, full of curiosity, not unmixed with astonshment over his continued silence.

It was when, drawn by the wonder that consumed hem, they gathered in a group near the door of one f the bunkhouses, that Harlan moved toward them.

For he had noted that they had become grouped, nd that into the atmosphere had come a tension.

Harlan's actions had been governed by design. His ontinued silence had been strategy of a subtle order. t had attracted the attention of the men, it had inrigued their interest.

If he had spoken to them while they had been movng about on their different errands, telling them that ıenceforth he was to manage the Rancho Seco, they vould have given him scant attention. Also, he would ıot have been able to study their faces as he had tudied them while they had been watching him, and ıe would not have gained the knowledge of their chacters that he now possessed.

Besides, a humorous malice possessed Harlan—he vanted to view them collectively when he gave them is news, to note the various ways in which they would eceive it.

Absolute silence greeted Harlan's forward move-

ment. He could hear the labored breathing of some of the men — men of violent temper who sensed trouble — and his grin grew broad as he halted within a dozen feet of the group.

"Boys," he said, slowly, "you've got a new boss. It's me. A day or so ago, crossin' from Pardo, I run into a ruckus at Sentinel Rock. Lane Morgan was the center of the ruckus — an' he got perforated — plenty. But before he cashed in he got a gleam of downright sense an' told me he'd been lookin' for me, to make me manager of the Rancho Seco.

"I'm reckonin' to be manager — beginnin' now. If there's any of you men that ain't admirin' to do the jumpin' when I yap orders to you, you're doin' your gassin' right now. Them that's pinin' to work under me is sure of a square deal, beginnin' now, and continuin' henceforth. I reckon that's all."

Into Harlan's eyes as he talked had come that vacuous light that had been in them when he had faced Deveny's men in Lamo — the light that was always in his eyes whenever he faced more than one man, with trouble imminent.

He saw the face of every man in the group — while seeming not to be looking at any of them. He noted the various shades of expression that came into their faces as they digested his words, he saw how some of them watched him with sober interest and how others permitted themselves a sneer of incredulity or dislike.

He noted that a tall, slender, swarthy man on the extreme left of the group watched him with a malevolent gaze, his eyes flaming hate; he saw a black-

haired, hook-nosed fellow near the center of the group watching him with a grin of cold contempt.

It seemed to Harlan that a fair proportion of the men were willing to acknowledge his authority — for they were frankly studying him, ready to greet him as their employer. Many others, however, were as frankly hostile.

After Harlan ceased speaking there came a short silence, during which many of the men looked at one another inquiringly.

It was a moment during which, had a leader appeared to take the initiative for those who intended to dissent from Harlan's rule, the outfit might have been divided.

Evidently the tall, swarthy man divined that the time to dissent had come, for he cleared his throat, and grinned felinely.

Before he could speak, however, a short man with keen eyes that, since the instant they had rested upon Harlan, had been glowing with something that might have been defined as mingled astonishment and delight thinly concealed by a veneer of humor — said distinctly:

"You crossed over from Pardo — you say?"

Harlan nodded, and a pin-point of recognition glowed in his eyes as he looked at the man.

The other laughed, lowly. "Seems I know you," he said. "You're 'Drag' Harlan!"

A tremor ran through the group. There was a concerted stiffening of bodies, a general sigh from lungs in process of deflation. And then the group stood

silent, every man watching Harlan with that intent curiosity that comes with one's first glimpse of a noted character, introduced without expectation.

Harlan noted that a change had come over the men. Those whose faces had betrayed their inclination to accept his authority had taken — without exception — a glum, disappointed expression. On the other hand, those who had formerly betrayed hostility, were now grinning with satisfaction.

A tremor of malicious amusement, expressed visibly by a flicker of his eyelids, was Harlan's only emotion over the change that had come in the men of the group. He could now have selected those of the men who — as Lane Morgan had said — could not be trusted, and he could have pointed out those who had been loyal to Morgan, and who would be loyal to Barbara and himself.

Among the former were the tall, swarthy man on the extreme left, and the hook-nosed fellow near the center. There were perhaps ten of the latter, and it was plain to Harlan that the short man who had spoken was their leader.

"'Drag' Harlan — eh?"

This was the tall, swarthy man. The malevolence had gone from his eyes, he was grinning broadly, though there was respect of a fawning character in his manner as he stepped out from the group and halted within a few feet of Harlan.

"Me an' my friends wasn't none tickled to find that we was goin' to have a new manager. We was sort of expectin' Miss Barbara to do the runnin' herself. But

if *you* say you're runnin' things, that makes it a whole lot different. We ain't buckin' 'Drag' Harlan's game."

"Thank you," grinned Harlan. "I saw you reportin' to Miss Morgan. You're straw-boss, I reckon."

"You've hit it. I'm Stroud—Lafe Stroud."

"You'll keep on bein' straw-boss," said Harlan, shortly. "I'm appointin' a foreman."

"Where's Lawson?"

It was Stroud who spoke. There was a shadow of disappointment in his eyes.

"Lawson won't be needin' a title any more," said Harlan, narrowing his eyes at the other. "He needs plantin'. Soon as we get set some of you boys can go over an 'take care of him. You'll find him in the harness shop. He busted down the door of Miss Barbara's room last night, an' she made a colander out of him."

Harlan ignored the effect of his news on the men, fixing his gaze on the short man who had spoken first, and who was now standing silent, in an attitude that hinted of dejection.

"You'll be foreman, Linton," he stated shortly.

Linton, who had been glumly listening, was so startled by the sudden descent upon his shoulders of the mantle of authority that he straightened with a snap and grabbed wildly at his hat—which dropped from his head despite his effort to clutch it, revealing a mop of fiery red hair. When he straightened, after recovering the hat, his freckled face was crimson with embarrassment and astonishment.

"I'm obliged to you," he mumbled.

That had ended it. The following morning Linton came to Harlan for orders, and a little later the entire outfit, headed by Stroud, and trailed by the chuck-wagon and the horses of the *remuda,* started southward to a distant section of the big level, leaving Linton and Harlan at the ranchhouse.

And as the outfit faded into the southern distance, Harlan, walking near the larger of the two bunkhouses, came upon Linton.

Harlan grinned when he saw the other.

"You didn't go with the outfit, Red?" he said. "Seems a foreman ought to be mighty eager to be with his men on their first trip after he's appointed."

Linton's face was pale, his gaze was direct.

"Look here, Harlan," he said, steadily. "I've knowed you a long time, an' I know that you're a damn' sight straighter than a lot of men which has got reputations better than yourn. But there's some things want explainin'. I've sort of took a shine to that little girl in there. There's things brewin' which is goin' to make it mighty bad for her. It wasn't so bad while old Morgan was here, but now he's gone, an' she's got to play it a lone hand.

"You git riled an' sling your gun on me if you want to. I know I wouldn't have a chance. But just the same, I'm tellin' you. You know that more'n half that outfit you've put me at the head of is Deveny's men—sneakin', thievin', murderin' outlaws?"

"You wantin' to quit, Red?" said Harlan, smoothly.

"Quit! Hell's fire! I'm hangin' on to the finish.

But I'm findin' out where you stand. What you meanin' to do with Barbara Morgan?"

Harlan grinned. "I answered that question when I appointed you foreman, Red. But I reckon I made a mistake — I ought to have appointed a man who knows what his think-box is for."

Linton flushed, and peered intently at the other.

"Meanin' that you're backin' Barbara in this here deal?" he demanded.

"A real thoughtful man would have tumbled to it quicker," was Harlan's soft, ironical reply.

For an instant Linton's gaze was intense with searching, probing inquiry. And Harlan's steady eyes were agleam with a light that was so quietly honest that it made Linton gasp:

"Damn me! You mean it! You're playin' 'em straight, face up. That talk of yourn about Lane Morgan makin' you manager was straight goods. I know Dolver an' Laskar an' the guy they call 'Chief' plugged Morgan — for I heard Stroud an' some more of them talkin' about it. An' I heard that you got Dolver an' Laskar, an' kept Deveny from grabbin' off Barbara Morgan, over in Lamo. But I thought you was playin' for Barbara, too — an' I wasn't figurin' on lettin' you."

Harlan laughed lowly.

"Things don't always shape up the way a man thinks they will, Red. I started for Lamo, figurin' to salivate Dolver an' the other guy who killed Davey Langan. I got Dolver at Sentinel Rock, an' I figured I'd be likely to run into the other guy somewheres —

mebbe findin' him in Deveny's gang. But runnin' into Lane Morgan sort of changed the deal. An' now I'm postponin' a lot of things until Barbara Morgan is runnin' free, with no coyotes from the Deveny crowd tryin' to rope her."

Linton's eyes were glowing, he crowded close to Harlan, so close that his body touched Harlan's, and he stood thus for an instant, breathing fast. Then, noting the unwavering, genial gleam in Harlan's eyes —a visible sign of Harlan's knowledge of his deep emotion—Linton seized one of the other's hands and gripped it tightly.

"Damn your hide," he said, lowly, "you had me goin'. I'm dead set on seein' that girl git a square deal, an' when I saw you makin' a play for them damned outlaws that are in the outfit, I sure figured there'd be hell a-poppin' around the Rancho Seco. You sure had me flabbergasted when you named me foreman, for I couldn't anticipate your trail none.

"But I reckon I'm wised up, now. You're goin' to run a whizzer in on 'em—playin' 'em for suckers. An' I'm your right-hand man—stickin' with you until hell runs long on icebergs!"

CHAPTER XIV

SHADOWS

A DESIRE to ride once more in the peaceful sunshine of the land she loved was one of the first indications that Barbara was recovering from the shock occasioned by her father's death. For two or three days she had not stirred from her room, except to go downstairs to cook her meals. She had spent much of her time sitting at a window nursing her sorrow.

But on this morning she got out of bed feeling more composed than usual, with several new emotions struggling for the mastery. One of those emotions was that of intolerance.

Harlan's assumption of authority enraged her. He had come to the Rancho Seco with no credentials other than his mere word that her father had forced him to promise to "take hold" of "things." And she intended, this very morning, to send Harlan away, and to assume control of the ranch herself.

This determination held until after she had breakfasted, and then she stood for a long time in the kitchen door, looking out into the brilliant sunshine, afflicted with a strange indecision.

Harlan *had* helped to fill the void created by her father's death — that was certain. There had been something satisfying in his presence at the ranch; it had seemed to mean an assurance for her safety; she had felt almost as fully protected as when her father

had been with her. It angered her to see him moving about the place as though he had a perfect right to be there, but at the same time she felt comfortably certain that as long as he was around no harm could come to her.

Her emotions were so contradictory that she could not reach a decision regarding the action she should take and she bit her lips with vexation as she stood in the doorway.

Later, her cheeks a little flushed with the realization that she was surrendering to an emotion that she could not understand—but which, she decided guiltily, her face crimson, had its inception in a conviction that she would regret seeing Harlan ride away, to return no more—she went to the corral, roped her pony, threw saddle and bridle on it, mounted the animal, and rode away—westward.

She had not traveled more than half a mile when she heard the rapid beating of hoofs behind her. Glancing swiftly backward, she saw Purgatory coming, Harlan in the saddle, smoking a cigarette.

Her pulses leaped, unaccountably, and the crimson flush again stained her cheeks; but she sat rigid in the saddle, and looked straight ahead, pretending she had not discovered the presence of horse and rider behind her.

She rode another half mile before the flush died out of her cheeks. And then, responding to a swift indignation, she brought Billy to a halt, wheeled him, and sat motionless in the saddle, her face pale, her eyes flashing.

With apparent unconcern Harlan rode toward her. The big black horse did not change his pace, nor did Harlan change expression. It seemed to the girl that in both horse and rider were a steadfastness of purpose that nothing could change. And despite her indignation, she felt a thrill of admiration for both man and horse.

Yet her eyes were still flashing ominously when Harlan rode to within a dozen paces of her and brought the big black to a halt.

There was an expression of grave respect on Harlan's face; but she saw a lurking devil in his eyes — a gleam of steady, quizzical humor — that made her yearn to use her quirt on him. For by that gleam she knew he had purposely followed her; that he expected her to be angry with him for doing so. And the gleam also told her that he had determined to bear with her anger.

"Well?" she inquired, icily.

"Good mornin', ma'am." He bowed to her, sweeping his broad-brimmed hat from his head with, it seemed to her, an ironical flourish.

"Is there something you want to speak to me about?" she asked, her chin elevated, disdain in her eyes. She assured herself that when he glanced at her as he was doing at this instant, she positively hated him. She wondered why she had tolerated his presence.

"I wasn't havin' any thoughts about speakin' to you, ma'am. Kind of a nice mornin' for a ride, ain't it?"

"If one rides alone," she returned, significantly.

"I enjoy ridin' a whole lot better when I've got company," he stated, gravely, with equal significance.

"Meaning that you have made up your mind to ride with me, I suppose?" she said coldly.

"You've hit it, ma'am."

"Well," she declared, her voice quivering with passion; "I don't want you to ride with me. You came here and usurped whatever power and authority there is; and you are running the Rancho Seco as though it belongs to you. But you shan't ride with me—I don't want you to!"

Had she been standing she must have stamped one foot on the ground, so vehement was her manner. And the flashing scorn of her eyes should have been enough to discourage most men.

But not Harlan. His eyelids flickered with some emotion; and his eyes—she noted now, even though she could have killed him for his maddening insistence—were blue, and rimmed by heavy lashes that sun and sand had bleached until the natural brown of them threatened to become a light tan.

She studied him, even while hating him for she saw the force of him—felt it. And though she was thinking spiteful things of him, she found that she was forming a new impression of him—of his character, his appearance, and of the motives that controlled him.

And she thought she knew why men avoided having trouble with him. She told herself that if she were a man and she were facing him with violence in her heart, she would consider seriously before she betrayed

it to him. For in his eyes, in the lips, in the thrust of his chin — even in the atmosphere that surrounded him at this instant, was a threat, an unspoken promise, lingering and dormant, of complete readiness — almost eagerness, she was convinced — for violence.

She drew a sharp breath as she watched him. And when she saw his lips curving into a slight smile — wholesome, though grave; with a hint of boyish amusement in them — she got another quick impression of his character, new and startling and illuminating.

For behind the hard, unyielding exterior that he presented to men; back of the promise and the threat of violence, was the impulsiveness and the gentleness that would have ruled him had not the stern necessity of self-preservation forced him to conceal them.

The smile disarmed her. It *did* seem ludicrous — that she should try to force this man to do anything he did not want to do. And she had known that he would not obey her, and ride back to the ranchhouse; she was convinced that she must either go back or suffer him to follow her as he pleased.

And she was determined not to give up her ride. She was determined to be very haughty about it, though; but when she wheeled Billy, to head him again into the western distance, her eyes twinkled her surrender, and her lips trembled on the verge of a defiant smile.

Then Billy felt the quirt on his flank; he snorted with astonishment and disgust, and charged forward, tossing his head intolerantly.

Looking sidelong, after Billy had traveled two or

three hundred yards, Barbara observed that the big black horse was not more than half a dozen steps behind. And curiously, Barbara again experienced that comfortable assurance of protection, and of satisfaction over the nearness of Harlan.

Moved by an entirely unaccountable impulse, she drew the reins slightly on Billy, slowing him, almost imperceptibly, so that both horses had traveled more than a quarter of a mile before the distance between them lessened noticeably.

And then, with an impatience that caused her cheeks to glow, Barbara noted that Purgatory had slowed also, Harlan seemingly accommodating the animal's pace to her own. It was plain to see that Harlan did not intend to assume that she had relented.

For another quarter of a mile the distance remained the same, and the silence was unbroken except by the rhythmical beating of hoofs through the rustling, matted mesquite.

Then Barbara, yielding to an impulse of righteous anger, brought on by Harlan's obvious intention to remain at a respectful distance, deliberately brought Billy to a walk and waited until Harlan rode beside her.

"You don't need to be a brute—even if I did tell you to go back to the ranchhouse!"

"Meanin' what, ma'am? Why, I don't remember to have done anything. I was doin' a heap of thinkin' just now—if that's what you mean."

"Thinking mean things of me—I suppose—for what I said to you."

He had been thinking of her—seriously. And his thoughts were far from fickle as he watched her now, riding within a few feet of him, her profile toward him, her head having a rigid set, her chin held high, her lips tight-pressed, and her hair drooping in graceful coils over her ears, and bulging in alluring disorder at the nape of her neck.

He was thinking that he had braved, to answer a mere whim, greater dangers than he would be likely to meet in defending her from the wolf-pack which circumstances had set upon her. He was thinking that heretofore his life had been lived without regard to order or system—that he had led a will-o'-the-wisp existence, never knowing that such women as she graced the world. He was thinking of what might have happened to her had not Davey Langan been killed, and if he had not started out to avenge him.

Into his thoughts at this minute flashed a mental picture that paled his face and brought his lips into straight, hard lines—a picture of Barbara at the mercy of Deveny.

With a quick turn he brought Purgatory around in front of Billy, blocking the animal's further progress westward. The girl started at the rapid movement, and watched him fearfully, dreading—she knew not what.

But his smile—grim and mirthless though it was—partially reassured her, and she sat silent, looking at him as he spoke, rapidly, earnestly.

"I was thinkin' of you; an' I wasn't thinkin' mean things—about you. I was thinkin' of Deveny—an'

of what your dad told me over there by Sentinel Rock.

"Your dad told me that you was in danger—that Deveny an' Strom Rogers an' some more of them had their eyes turned on you. Your dad made me promise that I'd come here an' look out for you—an' I mean to do it. That's why I went to Lamo when I had no call to go there an' that's why I brought Deveny to a show-down in front of you.

"There's somethin' goin' on around here that ain't showin' on the surface—somethin' that's hidden an' sneakin'. You heard some of them guys in Lamo gassin' about the 'Chief' bein' one of the three that sent your dad over the Divide.

"Well, your dad told me that, too—that there was three of them pitched onto him. It was the fellow they call Chief that shot your dad while he was sleepin'—when it was too dark for your dad to see his face. Your dad made me promise to hunt that guy up an' square things for him. That's what I'm here for. Anyway, it's one reason I'm here. The other reason is that I'm goin' to see that you get a square deal from them guys.

"An' you won't get a square deal ridin' out alone, like this—especially when you head toward Sunset Trail, where Deveny an' his gang hang out. An' I'm settin' down hard on you ridin' that way. I'm keepin' you from runnin' any chances."

Silently Barbara had watched Harlan's face while he had been talking. There was no doubt that he was in earnest, and there was likewise no doubt that he was concerned for her safety. But why? It seemed ab-

surd that Harlan, an outlaw himself, should protect her from other outlaws. Yet in Lamo he had done just that.

Behind his actions, his expressed concern for her, must be a motive. What was it? Was it possible that he was doing this thing unselfishly; that the promise her father had exacted from him had changed him; that in his heart at this instant dwelt those finer impulses which must be dormant in all men, however bad?

The light of that great inquiry was in her eyes; they searched his face for subtlety and craft and cunning—for something that would give her a clue to his thoughts. And when she could find in his expression only a grave concern she pulled Billy around and started him back toward the ranchhouse.

They had not ridden more than a hundred yards before she stole a glance at Harlan.

He was now riding beside her, looking straight ahead, his face expressionless. Had he betrayed the slightest sign of triumph she would have changed her mind about going back to the ranchhouse with him.

As it was, she felt a pulse of rage over her readiness in yielding to his orders. Yet the rage was softened by a lurking, stealthy joy she got out of his masterfulness.

"I presume I may ride in another direction—east, for instance—or north, or south?"

He apparently took no notice of the mockery in her voice.

"You'll not be ridin' alone, anywhere," he declared.

"Oh!" she returned, raising her chin and looking at him with a cold scorn that, she thought, would embarrass him; "I am to have a guardian."

He looked straight back to her, steadily, seemingly unaffected by the hostility of her gaze.

"It amounts to that. But mebbe I wouldn't put it just that way. Somebody's got to look out for you — to see that you don't go to rushin' into trouble. There was trouble over in Lamo — if you'll remember."

And now he smiled gravely at her, and her face reddened over the memory of the incident. She had been eager enough, then, to seek his protection; she had trusted him.

"That wasn't your fault," he went on gently. "You didn't know then, mebbe, just what kind of a guy Deveny is. But you know now, an' it *would* be your fault if you run into him again."

He saw how she took it — how her color came and went, and how her eyes drooped from his. He smiled soberly.

"Looks to me that you've got to pin your faith to a mighty small chance, ma'am."

"What chance?" She looked at him in startled wonderment, for it had not occurred to her that she faced any real danger, despite the threatening attitude of Deveny, and her isolation. For the great, peaceful world, and the swimming sunlight were full of the promise of the triumph of right and virtue; and the sturdy self-reliance of youth was in her heart.

"What chance?" she repeated, watching him keenly.

"The chance that me an' Red Linton will be able

to get things into shape to look out for you." He was gravely serious.

"It must seem a mighty slim chance to you — me comin' here with a reputation that ain't any too good, an' Linton, with his red head an' his freckles. Seems like a woman would go all wrong, pinnin' her faith to red hair an' freckles an' a hell-raisin' outlaw. But there's been worse combinations, ma'am — if I do say it myself. An' me an' Red is figurin' to come through, no matter what you think of us."

"Red Linton?" she said. "That is the little, short, red-haired man you put in Lawson's place, isn't it? I have never noticed him — particularly. It seems that I have always thought him rather unimportant."

Harlan grinned. "That's a trick Red's got — seemin' unimportant. Red spends a heap of his time not sayin' anything, an' hangin' around lookin' like he's been misplaced. But when there's any trouble, you'll find Red like the banty rooster that's figurin' to rule the roost.

"I knowed him over in Pardo, ma'am — he rode for the T Down for two or three seasons."

"You are anticipating trouble — with Deveny?" she asked, a tremor in her voice.

"There ain't any use of tryin' to hide it, ma'am. Mebbe your dad thought you'd be better off by him not mentionin' it to you. But I've got a different idea. Anyone — man or woman — knows a heap more about how to go about things if they're sort of able to anticipate trouble. Your dad told me things was in a mixup over here with Deveny an' some more of his kind; an'

I ain't aimin' to let you go ramblin' around in the dark.

"About half the Rancho Seco men belong to Deveny's gang, Linton says. That's why I put Linton in Lawson's place; an' that's why I'm askin' you to stick pretty close to the Rancho Seco, an' requestin' you not to go rummagin' around the country."

She rode on silently, her face pale, digesting this disquieting news. She remembered now that her father *had* seemed rather worried at times, and that upon several occasions he had hinted that he was distrustful of some of the Rancho Seco men. But as Harlan had said, he had never taken her completely into his confidence — no doubt because he had not wanted her to worry. That was very like her father — always making life easy for her.

However, covertly watching Harlan, she was conscious of an emotion that the latter did not suspect. The emotion was confidence — not in Harlan, for, though she had seen that he, apparently, was eager to become her champion, she could not forget that he, too, was an outlaw, with no proof that he had been sent to the Rancho Seco by her father; with nothing but his actions to convince her that his motives were founded upon consideration for her welfare.

She thought of John Haydon as she rode beside Harlan; and it was confidence in him that was expressed in her glances at Harlan; she was convinced that she did not have to depend entirely upon Harlan. And when, as they neared the ranchhouse, and she saw a big gray horse standing near the entrance to the *patio,* her face reddened and her eyes grew brilliant

with a light that drew a cold smile to Harlan's face.

"That will be John Haydon's horse, I reckon," he said slowly.

"Why," she returned, startled; "how did you know?"

He rode on, not replying. When they reached the ranchhouse, Harlan loped Purgatory toward one of the bunkhouses, in front of which he saw Red Linton standing. Barbara directed Billy to the *patio* entrance, and dismounted, her face flushed, to meet a man who came out of the open gateway to greet her, his face wreathed in a delighted smile.

CHAPTER XV

LINKED

"SO YOU came at last?"

Barbara had some difficulty in keeping resentment prominent in her voice as she faced John Haydon, for other emotions were clamoring within her—joy because Haydon *had* come, even though tardily; self-reproach because she saw in Haydon's eyes a glowing anxiety and sympathy that looked as though they were of recent birth.

There was repressed excitement in Haydon's manner; it was as though he had only just heard of the girl's affliction and had ridden hard to come to her.

She was sure of the sincerity in his voice when he grasped her hands tightly and said:

"At last, Barbara! I heard it only this morning, and I have nearly killed my horse getting over here! Look at him!"

The gray horse certainly did have the appearance of having been ridden hard. He stood, his legs braced, his head drooping, his muzzle and chest flecked with foam. Barbara murmured pityingly as she stroked the beast's neck; and there was quick forgiveness in her eyes when she again looked at Haydon.

Haydon was big—fully as tall as Harlan, and broader. His shoulders bulged the blue flannel shirt he wore; and it was drawn into folds at his slim waist, where a cartridge-studded belt encircled him,

sagging at the right hip with the weight of a heavy pistol.

He wore a plain gray silk handkerchief at his throat; it sagged at the front, revealing a muscular development that had excited the envious admiration of men. His hair was coal-black, wavy and abundant—though he wore it short—with design, it seemed, for he must have known that it gave him an alert, virile appearance.

His face, despite the tan upon it, and the little wrinkles brought by the sun and wind, had a clear, healthy color, and his eyes black as his hair, had a keen glint behind which lurked humor of a quality not to be determined at a glance—it was changeable, fleeting, mysterious.

Barbara was silent. The steady courage that had sustained her until this instant threatened to fail her in the presence of this big, sympathetic man who seemed, to her, to embody that romance for which she had always longed. She looked at him, her lips trembling with emotion.

Until now she had had no confidant—no one she could be sure of. And so, with Haydon standing close to her, though not too close—for he had never been able to achieve that intimacy for which he had yearned—she told him what had happened, including details of her father's death, as related to her by Harlan; finishing by describing the incident with Deveny in Lamo (at which Haydon muttered a threat) and the subsequent coming of Harlan to the Rancho Seco, together with the story of his assumption of authority.

When she concluded Haydon laid a sympathetic hand on her shoulder.

"It's too bad, Barbara. And on top of it all, Lawson had to play the beast, too, eh? Why didn't you send someone to me?"

"There was no one to send." Her voice threatened to break, despite the brave gleam that flashed through the moisture in her eyes. "Lawson had sent the men away; and when they came in Harlan took charge of them. And—besides," she admitted, dropping her gaze, "I—I thought you ought to—I thought you would——"

He shook her, reprovingly, laughing deeply as he led her through the gateway into the *patio,* where they sat on a bench for a long time, talking, while the aspect of the *patio* began to change, becoming again a place of cheerfulness flooded with the soft, radiant light of returning happiness—reflected in her eyes; while the sunlight streaming down into the enclosure took on a brightness that made the girl's eyes glisten; while the drab and empty days since her father's death began to slip back into the limbo of memory—the sting and the sorrow of them removed. So does the heart of youth respond to the nearness of romance.

They had been talking for half an hour when Barbara remembered that Haydon had not expressed a desire to meet Harlan.

Haydon's face lost a little of its color as he replied to her suggestion that they find the man.

But he laughed, rather mirthlessly, she thought.

"I intend to see him, Barbara—but alone. There

are several things of importance that I want to say to him — chiefly concerning his conduct toward you."

He got up. Barbara rose also, and walked with him, outside the gate, where he got on his horse, smiling down at her.

"Harlan was right about your riding out alone. I'd stay as close to the ranchhouse as possible. There's no telling what Deveny might try to do. But don't worry. If it wasn't so soon after — after what has happened — I would —" He smiled, and Barbara knew he meant what he had said to her many times — about there being a parson in Lazette, a hundred miles or so northeastward — and of his eagerness to be present with her while the parson "tied the knot." His manner had always been jocose, and yet she knew of the earnestness behind it.

Still, she had not yielded to his importunities, because she had not been quite sure that she wanted him. Nor was she certain now, though she liked him better at this moment than she had ever liked him before.

She shook her head negatively, answering his smile; and watched him as he rode around a corner of the ranchhouse toward the corral where, no doubt, he would find Harlan.

Harlan had ridden directly to the bunkhouse door and dismounted. Red Linton said nothing until Harlan seated himself on a bench just outside the bunkhouse door. Then Linton grinned at him.

"There's a geezer come a-wooin'," he said.

Harlan glared at the red-haired man — a truculent,

savage glare that made Linton stretch his lips until the corners threatened to retreat to his ears. Then Linton assumed a deprecatory manner.

"They ain't no chance for *him,* I reckon. He's been burnin' up the breeze between here an' the Star for more'n a year—an' she ain't as much as kissed him, I'd swear!"

Harlan did not answer.

"You saw him?" questioned Linton.

"Shut your rank mouth."

Linton chuckled. "I didn't know you'd been hit that bad. Howsomever, if you *have* been, why, there's no sense of me wastin' time gassin' to you. They ain't nothin' will cure that complaint but petticoats an' smiles—the which is mighty dangerous an' uncertain. I knowed a man once——"

Harlan got up and walked to the bunkhouse. And Linton, grinning, called loudly after him, pretending astonishment.

"Why, he's gone. Disappeared complete. An' me tryin' to jam some sense into his head."

Grinning, Linton sauntered away, vanishing within the blacksmith-shop.

He had hardly disappeared when Haydon appeared from around a corner of the ranchhouse, at about the instant Harlan, sensing the departure of Linton, came to the door, frowning.

The frown still narrowed Harlan's eyes when they rested upon the horseman; and his brows were drawn together with unmistakable truculence when Haydon dismounted near the corral fence.

Haydon's manner had undergone a change. When in the presence of Barbara he had been confident, nonchalant. When he dismounted from his horse and walked toward Harlan there was about him an atmosphere that suggested carefulness. Before Haydon had taken half a dozen steps Harlan was aware that the man knew him — knew of his reputation — and feared him.

Respect was in Haydon's eyes, in the droop of his shoulders, in his hesitating step. And into Harlan's eyes came a gleam of that contempt which had always seized him when in the presence of men who feared him.

And yet, had not Harlan possessed the faculty of reading character at a glance; had he not had that uncanny instinct of divining the thoughts of men who meditated violence, he could not have known that Haydon feared him.

For Haydon's fear was not abject. It was that emotion which counsels caution, which warns of a worthy antagonist, which respects force that is elemental and destroying.

Haydon smiled as he halted within a few paces of Harlan and turned the palms of his hands outward.

"You're 'Drag' Harlan, of Pardo," he said.

Harlan nodded.

"My name's Haydon. I own the Star — about fifteen miles west — on Sunset Trail. I happen to be a friend of Miss Morgan's, and I'd like to talk with you about the Rancho Seco."

"Get goin'."

Haydon's smile grew less expansive.

"It's a rather difficult subject to discuss. It rather seems to be none of my affair. But you will understand, being interested in Barbara's future, and in the welfare of the ranch, why I am presuming to question you. What do you intend to do with the ranch?"

"Run it."

"Of course," smiled Haydon. "I mean, of course, to refer to the financial end of it. Miss Morgan will handle the money, I suppose."

"You got orders from Miss Barbara to gas to me about the ranch?"

"Well, no, I can't say that I have. But I have a natural desire to know."

"I'll be tellin' her what I'm goin' to do."

Haydon smiled faintly. Twice, during the silence that followed Harlan's reply, Haydon shifted his gaze from Harlan's face to the ground between himself and the other, and then back again. It was plain to Haydon that he could proceed no farther in that direction without incurring the wrath that slumbered in Harlan's heart, revealed by his narrowing eyes.

In Harlan's heart was a bitter, savage passion. Hatred for this man, which had been aroused by Barbara's reference to him, and intensified by his visit to the girl, had been made malignant by his appearance now in the rôle of inquisitor.

Jealousy, Harlan would not have admitted; yet the conviction that Haydon was handsome, and that women would like him — that no doubt Barbara already liked him — brought a cold rage to Harlan. He

stood, during the momentary silence, his lips curving with contempt, his eyes glinting with a passion that was unmistakable to Haydon.

He stepped down from the doorway and walked slowly to Haydon, coming to a halt within a yard of him. His hands were hanging at his sides, his chin had gone a little forward; and in his manner was the threat that had brought a paralysis of fear to more than one man.

Yet, except for a slow stiffening of his muscles, Haydon betrayed no fear. There was a slight smile on his lips; his eyes met Harlan's steadily and unblinkingly. In them was a glint of that mysterious humor which other men had seen in them.

"I know you're lightning on the draw, Harlan," he said, his faint smile fading a trifle. "I wouldn't have a chance with you; I'm not a gun-fighter. For that reason I don't want any disagreement with you. And I've heard enough about you to know that you don't shoot unless the other fellow is out to 'get' you.

"We won't have any trouble. Be fair. As the man who will ultimately take charge of the Rancho Seco — since Miss Barbara has been good enough to encourage me — I would like to know some things. I've heard that Lane Morgan was killed at Sentinel Rock, and that you were with him when he died — and just before. Did he give you authority to take charge of the Rancho Seco?"

"He told me to take hold."

"A written order?"

"His word."

"He said nothing else; there were no papers on him—nothing of value?"

Neither man had permitted his eyes to waver from the other's since Harlan had advanced; and they now stood, with only the few feet of space between them, looking steadily at each other.

Harlan saw in Haydon's eyes a furtive, stealthy gleam as of cupidity glossed over with a pretense of frank curiosity. He sensed greed in Haydon's gaze, and knowledge of a mysterious quality.

Haydon knew something about Lane Morgan's errand to Pardo; he knew why the man had started for Pardo, and what had been on his person at the time of his death.

Harlan was convinced of that; and the light in his eyes as he looked into Haydon's reflected the distrust and the contempt he had for the man.

"What do you think Morgan had in his clothes?" he questioned suddenly.

A slow flush of color stole into Haydon's cheeks, then receded, leaving him a trifle pale. He laughed, with a pretense of mockery.

"You ought to know," he said, a snarl in his voice. "You must have searched him."

Harlan grinned with feline mirthlessness. And he stepped back a little, knowledge and satisfaction in his eyes.

For he had "looked Haydon over," following Morgan's instructions. He had purposely permitted Haydon to question him, expecting that during the exchange of talk the man would say something that

would corroborate the opinion that Harlan had instantly formed, that Haydon was not to be trusted.

And Haydon's snarl; the cupidity in his eyes, and his ill-veiled eagerness had convinced Harlan.

Harlan did not resent Haydon's manner; he was too pleased over his discovery that Haydon possessed traits of character that unfitted him for an alliance with Barbara. And it would be his business to bring those traits out, so that Barbara could see them unmistakably.

He laughed lowly, dropping his gaze to Haydon's belt; to his right hand, which hung limply near his pistol holster; and to the woolen shirt, with the silk handkerchief at the throat sagging picturesquely.

His gaze roved over Haydon—insolently, contemptuously; his lips twitching with the grim humor that had seized him. And Haydon stood, not moving a muscle, undergoing the scrutiny with rigid body, with eyes that had become wide with a queer sensation of dread wonder that was stealing over him; and with a pallor that was slowly becoming ghastly.

For he had no doubt that at last he had unwittingly aroused the demon in Harlan, and that violence, which he had wished to avoid, was imminent.

But Harlan's roving gaze, as he backed slightly away from Haydon, came to the breast-pocket of the man's shirt. His gaze centered there definitely, his eyes narrowing, his muscles leaping a little.

For out of the pocket stretched a gold chain, broken, its upper end—where it entered the buttonhole of the shirt—fastened to the buttonhole with a rawhide

thong, as though the gold section were not long enough to reach.

And the gold section of the chain was of the peculiar pattern of the section that Harlan had picked up on the desert near Sentinel Rock.

CHAPTER XVI

DEEP WATER

DESPITE his conviction that he stood in the presence of the mysterious "Chief" of whom he had heard much, Harlan's expression did not change. There was a new interest added to it, and a deeper glow in his eyes. But he gave no outward evidence of surprise.

"I reckon I searched him," he said, answering Haydon's charge. "If I found anything on him I'm turnin' it over to Barbara Morgan—or hangin' onto it. That's my business."

Haydon laughed, for Harlan's voice had broken the tension that had come with the interval of threatening silence.

Since he could not induce Harlan to divulge anything of interest there was nothing to do but to withdraw as gracefully as possible. And he backed away, smiling, saying placatively:

"No offense intended, Harlan. I was merely curious on Barbara's account." He mounted his horse, urged it along the corral fence, and sent back a smiling:

"So-long."

Motionless, still standing where he had stood when Haydon climbed on his horse, Harlan watched while the man rode the short distance to the house. At the corner around which he had appeared some minutes

before, Haydon brought his horse to a halt, waved a hand — at Barbara, Harlan supposed — and then rode on, heading westward toward Sunset Trail.

Harlan watched him until he had penetrated far into the big valley; then he turned, slowly, and sought Red Linton — finding him in the blacksmith-shop.

Later in the day — after Harlan and Linton had talked long, standing in the door of the blacksmith-shop — Linton mounted his horse and rode to where Harlan stood.

Linton was prepared for a long ride. Folded in the slicker that was strapped to the cantle of his saddle was food; he carried his rifle in the saddle sheath, and a water-bag bulged above the horse's withers.

"You won't find all the T Down boys yearnin' to bust into this ruckus," Harlan said as he stood near Linton's horse as Linton grinned down at him; "but there'll be some. Put it right up to them that it ain't goin' to be no pussy-kitten job, an' that it's likely some of them won't ever see the T Down again. But to offset that, you can tell 'em that if we make good, the Rancho Seco will owe them a heap — an' they'll get what's comin' to them."

He watched while Linton rode eastward over the big level; then he grinned and walked to the ranch-house, going around the front and standing in the wide gateway where he saw Barbara sitting on a bench in the *patio,* staring straight ahead, meditatively, unaware that he was standing in the gateway, watching her.

Harlan watched the girl for a long time — until she

turned and saw him. Then she blushed and stood up, looking at him in slight wonderment as he came toward her and stood within a few feet of her.

On Harlan's face was a slow, genial grin.

"Sunnin' yourself, eh?" he said. "Well, it's a mighty nice day—not too hot. Have you knowed him long?"

The startling irrelevance of the question caused Barbara to gaze sharply at Harlan, and when their eyes met she noted that his were twinkling with a light that she could not fathom. She hated him when she could not understand him.

"Mr. Haydon, do you mean?" she questioned, a sudden coldness in her voice.

Harlan nodded.

"A little more than a year, I think. It was just after I returned from school, at Denver."

He watched her, saying lowly:

"So it was Denver. I'd been wonderin'. I knowed it must have been some place. Schoolin' is a thing that I never had time to monkey with—I reckon my folks didn't believe a heap in 'em."

"You've lived in the West all your life—you were born in the West, I suppose?"

He looked keenly at her. "I expect you knowed that without askin'. I've been wonderin' if it would have made any difference."

"How?"

"In me. Do you think an education makes a man act different—gives him different ideas about his actions—in his dealin's with women, for instance?"

"I expect it does. Education should make a man more considerate of women—it is refining."

"Then you reckon a man that ain't had any education is coarse, an' don't know how to treat a woman?"

"I didn't say that; I said education *should* make a man treat women that way."

"But it don't always?"

"I think not. I have known men—well educated men—who failed to treat women as they should be treated."

"Then that ain't what you might call a hard-an'-fast rule—it don't always work. An' there's hope for any man who ain't had schoolin'—if he's wantin' to be a man."

"Certainly."

"But an educated man can't claim ignorance when he aims to mistreat a woman. That's how it figures up, ain't it?"

She laughed. "It would seem to point to that conclusion."

"So you've knowed Haydon about a year? I reckon he's educated?"

"Yes." She watched him closely, wondering at his meaning—why he had brought Haydon's name into the discussion. She was marveling at the subtle light in his eyes.

"Your father liked Haydon—he told me Haydon was the only square man in the country—besides himself an' Sheriff Gage."

"Father liked Haydon. I'm beginning to believe you really *did* have a talk with father before he died!"

He smiled. "Goin' back to Haydon. I had a talk with him a little while ago. I sort of took a shine to him." He drew from a pocket the section of gold chain he had found on the desert, holding it out to her.

"Here's a piece of Haydon's watch chain," he said slowly, watching her face. "The next time Haydon comes to see you, give it to him, tellin' him I found it. It's likely he'll ask you where I found it. But you can say I wasn't mentionin'."

He turned, looking back over his shoulder at her as he walked toward the gate.

She stood, holding the glittering links in the palm of one hand, doubt and suspicion in her eyes.

"Why," she called after him; "he was just here, and you say you talked with him! Why didn't you give it to him?"

"Forgot it, ma'am. An' I reckon you'll be seein' him before I do."

Then he strode out through the gate, leaving her to speculate upon the mystery of his words and his odd action in leaving the chain with her when he could have personally returned it to Haydon.

Harlan, however, was grinning as he returned to the bunkhouse. For he wanted Barbara to see Haydon's face when the section of chain was returned to him, to gain whatever illumination she could from the incident. He did not care to tell her—yet—that Haydon had killed her father; but he did desire to create in her mind a doubt of Haydon, so that she would hesitate to confide to him everything that happened at the Rancho Seco.

For himself, he wanted to intimate delicately to Haydon his knowledge of what had really occurred at Sentinel Rock; it was a message to the man conveying a significance that Haydon could not mistake. It meant that for some reason, known only to himself, Harlan did not intend to tell what he knew.

CHAPTER XVII

FORGING A LETTER

THE impulse which had moved Harlan to send Red Linton to the T Down ranch to enlist the services of some of his old friends had resulted from a conviction that he could not depend upon those men of the Rancho Seco outfit who had seemed to him, to be unfriendly to Stroud, the straw-boss. He knew nothing about them, and their loyalty to Barbara Morgan might be of a quality that would not endure through the sort of trouble that seemed to be imminent.

The T Down men—those who would come—would stand with him no matter what happened—they would do his will without question.

There was no doubt in Harlan's mind that John Haydon was the mysterious "Chief"—the man who had sent into Lane Morgan's breast the bullet that had ultimately killed him; and there was no doubt that some powerful, secret force was at work in the country, and that the force was directing its attention to the Rancho Seco and the defenseless girl who was at the nominal head of it. For some reason the secret force had killed her father, had isolated the ranch, had encompassed it with enemies, and was working slowly and surely to enmesh the girl herself.

Harlan was convinced that one of the motives behind the subtle aggressions of the men was a yearning

for the gold that Morgan had left — in fact the presence of Dolver and Laskar at Sentinel Rock — and Morgan's word to him about the gold — provided sufficient evidence on that score.

They had watched Morgan; they suspected he was taking gold to Pardo to have it assayed, and they had killed him in the hope of finding something on his person which would reveal to them where he had hidden the rest of it.

One other motive was that of the eternal, ages-old passion of a man for woman. Evidence of that passion had been revealed to Harlan at Lamo, by the attack on Barbara by Deveny's hireling — Higgins; by the subtle advances of John Haydon. It seemed to Harlan that all of these men had been — and were — equally determined to possess the girl.

And yet back of it all — behind that which had been rendered visible by the actions of the man and by Harlan's own deductions — was something else — something stealthy and hidden; a secret threat of dire things to come — a lingering promise of trickery.

Standing at one of the gates of the corral upon the third morning following Linton's departure, Harlan considered this phase of the situation. He felt the hidden threat of something sinister that lurked in the atmosphere.

It was all around him. It seemed to lie secreted in the yawning space that engulfed the Rancho Seco — south, north, and east. From the haze that stretched into the unending distance westward it seemed to come, bearing its whispered promise. The solemn hills that

flanked the wide stretches of Sunset Valley seemed to hint of it—somberly.

Mystery was in the serene calm that seemed to encompass the big basin; from the far reaches westward, in the misty veil that seemed to hang from the far-flung shafts of sunlight that penetrated the fleecy clouds, came the sinister threat—the whole section seemed to pulse with it.

And yet Harlan knew there could be no mystery except the mysteries of men. Nature was the same here as in any other section of the world, and her secrets were not more profound than usual.

He grinned mirthlessly at the wonderful basin, noting that the Rancho Seco buildings seemed to lie on a direct line with its center; that the faint trail that ran through the basin—the trail men traveled—came on in its undulating way straight toward the Rancho Seco ranchhouse, seemed to bring the mystery of the big basin with it; seemed to be a link that connected the Rancho Seco with the promise of trouble.

That impression might have engaged the serious thoughts of some men. It widened the smile on Harlan's face. For he knew there was no threat in the beauty of the valley; that it did not hide its secrets from the prying eyes of men. Whatever secret the valley held was in the minds of men—the minds of Deveny and the mysterious "Chief," and their followers.

Harlan had not absented himself from the ranchhouse since the departure of Linton. He had lounged in the vicinity of the buildings during the day—and

Barbara had seen him many times from the windows; and he had spent his nights watching the ranchhouse, half expecting another attack on Barbara.

The girl had seen him at night, too; and she had smiled at the picture he made with the moonlight shining upon him — or standing in some shadow — somber, motionless, undoubtedly guarding her.

She saw him this morning, too, as he stood beside the corral gate, and there was a glow in her eyes that, had he seen it, might have thrilled him with its gratitude.

She came out of a rear door after a while, and Harlan was still standing at the gate.

He watched her as she came toward him — it was the first time she had ventured in that direction since the return from Lamo with him — noting that she seemed to be in better spirits — that she was smiling.

"You looked lonesome," she said, as she halted near him. "Did Linton join the outfit?"

"It's likely; he went three days ago."

"I knew he had gone; I saw you several times, and you were always alone. And," she added, looking keenly at him; "I saw you several times, at night. Don't you ever sleep?"

"I reckon I'm a sort of restless cuss."

Her face took on serious lines.

"Look here, Harlan," she said, reprovingly, "you are keeping something back. You have been watching the ranchhouse at night — and during the day. You are guarding me. Why is it? Do you think I am going to run away?"

"From me?" he queried; "I was hopin' you wouldn't."

She stiffened with exasperation, for she felt the insincerity in his manner — caught the humorous note in his voice.

"You are treating me as you would treat a child," she declared; "and I won't have it. Are you watching me because you fear there might be another — Lawson?"

"There might be."

"Nonsense! There isn't another man in the section would dare what Lawson dared!"

"Gentlemen — eh?" he said, tauntingly. "Well, I've nosed around quite considerable, an' I don't remember to have ever run into a place where there was fewer *men* than in this neck of the woods."

"There are plenty of gentlemen. Do you think John Haydon ——"

Harlan grinned faintly. "He's been fannin' it right along for half an hour," he said, with seeming irrelevance.

"Who?" she asked, with a swift, uncomprehending glance at him.

"Your gentleman," he said slowly.

She followed the direction of his gaze, and saw, on the trail that led downward from a little table-land to the level that stretched toward the ranchhouse, a horseman, coming rapidly toward them.

"It's Mr. Haydon!" she ejaculated, her voice leaping.

"So it is," said Harlan, dryly. He looked keenly

at her, noting the flush on her face, the brightness of her eyes. "You ain't forgettin' to give him that piece of chain."

"Why," she said, drawing the glittering links from a pocket of her skirt; "I have it here. You may return it to him."

"Me an' Haydon ain't on speakin' terms," he smiled. "He wouldn't appreciate it none, if I give it to him."

"Why—" she began, only to pause and look at him with a sudden comprehension in her eyes. For into Harlan's face had come an expression that, she thought, she could analyze. It was jealousy. That was why he was reluctant to return the chain to Haydon.

The situation was so positively puerile, she thought, that she almost felt like laughing. She would have laughed had it not been that she knew of Harlan's unfailing vigilance—and that she felt differently toward him now than she had felt during the first days of their acquaintance. His steadfast vigilance, she decided, must have been responsible for the change, together with the steady consideration he revealed for her.

At any rate, something about him had affected her. She felt more gentle toward him; more inclined to believe in him; and there had been times during the past few days when she had been astonished at the subtle, warm sensation that had stolen over her whenever she saw him or whenever she thought of him.

Something of that warmth toward him was in her

eyes now as she watched him and she decided that she should humor his whim; that she should perform the action that he was reluctant to perform.

She smiled, with the wisdom of a woman to whom a secret had been unwittingly revealed.

"You don't like Haydon?"

"Him an' me ain't goin' to be bosom friends."

"Why don't you like him?" she asked banteringly.

She thought his grin was brazen. "Why don't you like me?"

"I don't know," she said coldly. But her face reddened a little.

"Well," he laughed; "that's why I don't like Haydon.

Haydon had crossed the big level, and was close to the ranchhouse.

The girl had determined to remain where she was, to return the piece of chain to Haydon in the presence of Harlan — in order to learn what she could of the depth of Harlan's dislike for Haydon when in the presence of the latter. And so a silence came between them as they watched Haydon ride toward them.

When Haydon rode close to them he halted his horse and sat in the saddle, an expression of cold inquiry on his face. His smile at Miss Barbara was a trifle forced; his glance at Harlan had a fair measure of frank dislike and suspicion in it.

Harlan deliberately turned his back toward Barbara and Haydon when the latter dismounted; walked a little distance, and pretended to be interested in a snubbing post in the corral.

Yet he cast furtive glances toward the two, and when he saw the girl reaching into a pocket for the section of chain he had given her, he slowly sauntered forward, and was within hearing distance when Barbara spoke to Haydon.

"I was to give you this," she said—and she extended a hand toward Haydon, the chain dangling from her fingers.

Harlan saw Haydon's muscles leap and become tense. He saw the man's color go, saw his cheeks whiten; observed that his eyes widened and gleamed with mingled astonishment and alarm.

He regained control of himself instantly, however, but Harlan had seen enough to strengthen his convictions, and he grinned as Haydon flashed a sharp glance at him.

Barbara, too, had noted the strange light in Haydon's eyes; she had seen that Haydon had seemed about to shrink from the chain when she held it out to him. She looked from Haydon to Harlan inquiringly and when her glance again returned to Haydon he was smiling.

However, he had not taken the chain from her hand.

"Is it yours?" she asked.

"Yes—mine," he answered, hesitatingly. "Where did you find it?"

"Mr. Harlan found it." Barbara noted Haydon's quick start, the searching glance he gave Harlan—who was now leaning on a rail of the corral fence, seemingly uninterested.

Haydon laughed, a little hoarsely, it seemed to Barbara, and more loudly than the occasion seemed to demand. She thought, though, that the laugh might have been a jeer for Harlan's action in turning the chain over to her instead of returning it directly to the owner.

She did not catch the searching inquiry of Haydon's glance at Harlan, nor did she see Harlan's odd smile at Haydon, and the slow wink that accompanied it.

But the wink and the smile conveyed to Haydon the intelligence that Harlan knew the story connected with the loss of the chain, and that he had not communicated it to the girl. They also expressed to Haydon the message that Harlan and Haydon were kindred souls — the smile and the wink told Haydon that this man who knew his secret was secretly applauding him, even while inwardly laughing at him for his fear that the secret would be betrayed.

Harlan's voice broke a short silence.

"Found it right about here — the other day. It must have laid there a long time, for it took a heap of polishin' to brighten it up." Again he closed an eye at Haydon, and the latter grinned broadly.

Barbara silently endured a pang of disappointment. She had caught Harlan's wink. The man had betrayed jealousy only a few minutes ago, and he had refused personally to return the chain to Haydon. And yet he stood there now, smiling and winking at the other, evidently with the desire to ingratiate himself. Sycophant, weakling, or fool — which was he? She shuddered with disgust, deliberately turned her

back to Harlan, and began to walk toward the ranch-house, Haydon following.

And Harlan, standing at the fence, leaned an elbow on one of the rails and watched the two, an enigmatic smile on his face.

For he had succeeded in opening a gate which disclosed a trail that would lead him straight to the mystery, a breath of which had been borne to him that morning upon the slight breeze that had swept down to him from the mighty valley out of which Haydon had ridden.

Between him and Haydon a bond had been established, fashioned from the links of the section of chain.

CHAPTER XVIII

HARLAN RIDES ALONE

UPON the morning of the fourth day following Haydon's visit to the Rancho Seco, a dust cloud developed on the northwestern horizon. Harlan observed the cloud; he had been watching for it since dawn, when he had emerged from the stable door, where he had been looking after Purgatory.

From the ranchhouse Barbara also saw the cloud, and she ran upstairs to one of the north windows. There, with her face pressed against the glass, she watched the cloud grow in size, observed that it was dotted with the forms of horsemen; saw at last that the horsemen were headed straight for the Rancho Seco. Then, wondering, anxious, eager, she descended the stairs and ran out to where Harlan was standing, speaking breathlessly:

"What does it mean? Who are they?"

"It'll be Red Linton an' some T Down boys."

"'T Down'?"

"Pardo men. From where I used to work. I sent Linton for them. If I'm going to run a ranch I aim to run it with men I can depend on."

She had hardly spoken to him in the four days that had elapsed since Haydon's last visit, for the disgust she had felt that day had endured. But there was something new in his manner now—a briskness, a business-like air that made her look sharply at him.

He smiled at her, and in the smile was a snapping humor that puzzled her.

She stood, watching for a while — until the group of horsemen became clearly defined — and then, with a sudden fear that the men might be outlaws of the same type as Harlan — possibly he had sent for them because they were — she returned to the ranchhouse and watched from one of the windows.

When the T Down men rode up to the corral gate they dismounted and surrounded Harlan. There were ten of them — rugged-looking fellows of various ages, bepistoled, begrimed with dust, and articulate with profane expressions of delight.

"Hell's a-poppin', Red says!" yelled one. "He says there's geezers here which is pinin' for yore gore. Turn me loose on 'em — oh, turn me loose!"

The men, tired, dusty, and hungry, swarmed into one of the bunkhouses immediately after they had turned their horses into the corral and cared for their saddles.

The men were in good spirits, despite their long ride; and for half an hour after they descended upon the bunkhouse the air pulsed with their talk and their laughter, as they washed their dust-stained faces from the tin washbasin on the bench outside the door, and combed their hair with a comb attached to a rawhide thong that swung from the wall above the basin.

They had been informed by Red Linton regarding the situation that had developed at the Rancho Seco — fully informed before they had begun their trip westward — Linton scrupulously and faithfully present

ng to them the dangers that confronted them. And though some of them were still curious, and sought a word with Harlan in confirmation, they seemed to be satisfied to trust to Harlan's judgment. Their faith was of the kind that needs but little verbal reassurance.

That they admired the man who had sent for them there was little doubt; for they watched him with glowing eyes as he talked with them, revealing their pride that they had been selected. Hardy, clear-eyed, serenely unafraid, they instantly adapted themselves to the new "job," and before their first meal was finished they were thoroughly at home.

Shortly afterward—while the men were lounging about inside—Harlan drew Linton outside.

"That's the bunch I would have picked if I had gone myself," complimented Harlan. "I'm thankin' you a heap."

He whispered to Linton the story of Haydon's last visit and for the first time Linton heard about the section of chain which convicted Haydon of the murder of Lane Morgan. Linton's eyes gleamed.

"I've always sort of suspected the son-of-a-gun!" he declared. "An' him makin' love to Barbara! The sneakin' coyote! An' so you're goin' to see him? I'd be a whole lot careful."

Harlan's smile was grave. "I'm reckonin' to be. I'd have gone before this, but I was waitin' for you boys. Nobody is sayin' anything to anybody. You're stickin' close to the Rancho Seco, not lettin' Barbara out of your sight. That's what I wanted you an' the other guys for. I'm playin' the rest of it a lone hand."

Leaving Linton standing near the bunkhouse, he went to the stable, where he threw saddle and bridle on Purgatory. Then he mounted, waved a hand at Linton, who was watching him, and rode to the ranch-house. At the northwest corner — around which Haydon had ridden on the occasion of his last visit — he brought Purgatory to a halt, for he saw Barbara just emerging from the *patio* gate.

She halted in the opening when she observed him; making a picture that was vivid in his memory for many days afterward — for her eyes were alight with wonder, her cheeks were flushed, and she was breathing fast.

For she had watched from a window the coming of the T Down men; she had noted the conference between Harlan and Linton; and she had seen Harlan waving a hand at the red-haired man, seemingly in farewell. She stood now, afflicted with a strange regret, suddenly aware that she would feel the absence of the man who sat on his horse before her — for she divined that he was going.

"I'm sayin' so-long to you, ma'am," smiled Harlan.

"Oh!" she said, aware of the flatness of her tone. "Are you going away?"

"I'm figurin' to go. I ain't used to hangin' around one place very long. But I'm comin' back some day. Red Linton an' the boys will be seein' that things go smooth with you. You can depend on Red, and all the boys. They're Simon-pure, dyed-in-the-wool, eighteen-carat men." And now he grinned, gravely. "Remember this, Barbara: A man will do things when

he's handlin' a gold chain — things that he wouldn't do if there didn't happen to be any chain."

He doffed his hat and slapped Purgatory sharply, heading the animal westward, toward the yawning mouth of the big basin that stretched its mighty length into the mystery of distance.

But his words left her with a conviction that she had again misjudged him, and that when he had appeared to fawn on Haydon he had been merely acting, merely pretending. She watched him, regretfully, longingly, assailed by emotions that she could not understand — until he and Purgatory grew small in the gulf of distance; until horse and rider were swallowed in the glowing haze.

CHAPTER XIX

HARLAN JOINS THE GANG

AT THE edge of the big level, where it merged into the floor of the basin, Harlan drew Purgatory to a halt. For an instant he sat in the saddle scrutinizing a section of buffalo grass that fringed a clump of willows near the almost dry bed of the river that doubled slightly as it came from the basin. Something in the appearance of the grass had attracted his attention—it was matted, as though something had lain or rolled in it.

He rode closer, cautiously, for the little trees formed a covert behind which any one of several dangers might lie concealed—and looked down at the grass. As he examined the place his lips twisted into a grim smile, and his eyes grew bright with comprehension.

He rode around the clump of trees, making sure it was not occupied; then he dismounted.

Someone had been concealed in the covert for many days—a man. For he saw the imprints of heels, and indentations where spurs had gashed the earth. The marks were all fresh—recently made. While he watched he saw some blades of the long grass slowly rise—as though, relieved from some pressure that had been upon them, they were eager to regain an upright position. He also saw scraps of food—jerked beef and biscuit—scattered here and there.

He frowned, convinced that for days a man had

occupied the covert, watching the Rancho Seco; convinced also, that the mystery he had sensed some days ago had been man-made, as he had felt. The man who had been there had been a sentinel, a spy, sent by Deveny or Haydon to observe his movements, and to report them, of course, to one or the other of the two outlaws.

Harlan remounted Purgatory. His caution had not been wasted, and his vigilance in guarding the ranchhouse must have been irritating to the man who had been watching.

He urged Purgatory on again — heading him westward, as before. And when he reached the crest of a slight rise in the valley — from where he could see the trail as it twisted and undulated around hills and into depressions — he saw, far up the valley — and yet not so far, either — not more than two miles — a horseman, riding slowly — away from him.

The horseman was the spy, of course. Harlan had no doubt that if he lingered in the vicinity of the covert long enough he would discover the place where the horse had been concealed. But that was not important, now that he had discovered enough to satisfy himself that there had been a spy — and so he rode on, smiling faintly, knowing that the rider was headed into the valley — possibly to the outlaw rendezvous to appraise Deveny and the others of his coming.

The trail was clearly defined, and there were places where it ran over broad levels of grass where he presented a good target to men who might be eager to send a shot at him. There were other spots where the

trail led into timber clumps and through tangles of brush where an ambuscade might be planned in perfect safety by an enemy; and there were the bastioned cliffs that towered above the trail at intervals, offering admirable hinding-places for any man with hostile intentions.

Harlan, however, rode steadily, outwardly unconcerned; inwardly convinced that no attempt would be made to ambush him. For Haydon has passed that way on his return to the Star, and Harlan had no doubt that since the incident of the smile and the wink, Haydon had passed word that he was not to be molested.

Haydon would be curious — as he had been curious at the Rancho Seco — to learn the significance of the smile and the wink. Haydon would want to discover just how much Harlan knew about the murder of Lane Morgan; and he would want to know what Harlan knew of the gold that Morgan had secreted. And so Harlan rode on, watching the country through which he passed, but feeling assured there would be no shot to greet him from one of the many natural vantage-points he encountered.

He rode for an hour, not making very good time, for it was a new trail, and he was examining the country intently as he passed, fixing it in his memory for future convenience, perhaps — no one ever knew just when it might be necessary to use one's knowledge — when he reached a low ridge which crossed the valley.

Here he halted Purgatory and gazed about him.

Before him stretched a green grass level, about two

miles long, running the entire width of the valley. It was dotted with mesquite, sage, and here and there the thorny blade of a cactus rose. Some cattle were grazing on the level; they were several miles south, and he could see some horsemen near them.

He decided he must be close to the Star; and he urged Purgatory on again, down upon the level, toward some timber that grew at the farther edge of the level. Just as he slipped down the slope of the ridge, he saw, far ahead of him, the horseman he had seen when he had entered the valley. The horseman was on the crest of a bald hill — low, and small — but Harlan caught a glimpse of him as he crossed it, riding fast.

Harlan smiled again, and rode on his way, resuming his scrutiny of the country.

The valley was mighty, magnificent; it deserved all the praise Barbara Morgan had heaped upon it. From the low mountain range on the north to the taller mountains southward, it was a virgin paradise in which reigned a peace so profound that it brought a reverent awe into the soul of the beholder.

It thrilled Harlan despite the certain blasé, matter-of-fact attitude he had for all of nature's phenomena; he found himself admiring the majestic buttes that fringed it; there was a glint of appreciation in his eyes for the colossal bigness of it — for the gigantic, sweeping curves which seemed to make of it an oblong bowl, a cosmic hollow, boundless, hinting of the infinite power of its builder.

The trail that ran through it, drawled to threadlike

proportions by the mightiness of the space through which it ran, was, for the greater part of the distance traveled by Harlan, a mere scratch upon a low rock ridge. And as he rode he could look down upon the floor of the valley, green and inviting.

When he entered the timber at the edge of the grass level, he was conscious of a stealthy sound behind him. He turned quickly in the saddle, to see a man standing at the edge of some brush that fringed the trail.

The man was big, a heavy black beard covered his chin and portions of his cheeks; his hat was drawn well down over his forehead, partially shielding his eyes.

A rifle in his hands was held loosely, and though it appeared that the man did not intend to use the weapon immediately, Harlan could see that his right forefinger was touching the trigger, and that the muzzle of the weapon was suggestively toward him.

For the past few miles of his ride Harlan had been expecting an apparition of this sort to appear, and so he now gave no sign of surprise. Instead, he slowly raised both hands until they were on a level with his shoulders — and, still twisted about in the saddle, he grinned faintly at the man.

"From now on I'm to have company, eh?" he said.

The man smirked grimly at him.

"You've hit it," he answered. "You're Harlan, ain't you? 'Drag' Harlan, the Pardo two-gun man?"

The man's eyes were glowing with interest — critical, almost cynical, and they roved over Harlan with a probing intensity that left no doubt in Harlan's mind

that the man had heard of him and was examining him with intent to discover what sort of a character he was.

Apparently satisfied — and also plainly impressed with what he saw, the man grinned — this time almost genially — and answered Harlan's affirmative nod with:

"Well, Haydon is expectin' you. You c'n let your paws down — takin' a heap of care not to go to foolin' with your guns. I ain't takin' them; Haydon didn't say anything about it. You're ridin' that trail that forks off to the left."

Harlan lowered his hands, resting them on the pommel of his saddle, and rode on, taking, as advised, a narrow trail that diverged from the other a short distance from where he had met the man. As he struck the other trail he heard the man coming behind him — on a horse.

There were no further words. Harlan kept to the trail, riding slowly; the man behind him following at a short distance.

In this manner they rode for perhaps a mile. Then the timber grew sparse, and Purgatory and his rider at last emerged upon a level that extended about a hundred feet and then sloped down abruptly to another level, through which flowed a narrow stream of water, shallow and clear.

Close to the bank of the stream was an adobe ranchhouse, and surrounding it were several other buildings. At a slight distance from the house was a corral in which were several horses. In front of a bunkhouse were several men who, when they saw Harlan and the

other man coming, faced toward them and stood, motionless, watching.

The men maintained silence as Harlan rode to the ranchhouse and sat in the saddle, awaiting the pleasure of his escort. He saw the latter grin at the other men as he passed them; and he grinned at Harlan as he brought his horse to a halt near Purgatory and dismounted.

"I reckon you're to git off an' visit," he said; "Haydon is inside." As he dismounted and trailed the reins over the head of his beast he cast a sharp, critical eye over Purgatory.

"There's a heap of hoss in that black, eh?"

"Plenty." Harlan got down and ran a hand over Purgatory's neck, while trailing the reins over his head. "Man-killer," he warned. "Don't touch him. He ain't been rode by nobody but me, an' he won't stand for nobody foolin' around him."

Harlan had raised his voice until he was sure the men in front of the bunkhouse heard him; then he grinned genially at them all and followed the black-bearded man into the ranchhouse.

An instant later, in a big room which had the appearance of an office, Harlan was confronting Haydon.

The latter was sitting in a chair at a desk, and when Harlan entered Haydon got up and grinned at him, shallowly, without mirth.

"So you got here," he said; "I've been expecting you."

"I've been notin' that. That guy you left at the

dge of the level to keep an eye on the Rancho Seco idn't cover his tracks. I run onto them — an' I saw im hittin' the breeze — comin' here. I reckon no-ody is surprised." Harlan grinned widely.

"So you noticed that," said Haydon, answering Harlan's grin. "Well, I don't mind admitting that ve've kept an eye on you. You've had me guessing."

Haydon's manner was that of the man who is care-ul not to say too much, his constraint was of the qual-ty that hints of a desire to become confidential — a mooth, bland courtesy; a flattering voice — encourag-ng, suggesting frankness.

Harlan's manner was that of a certain reckless care-essness. He seemed to be perfectly at ease, confident, leliberate, and unwatchful. He knew Haydon was an outlaw; that the men who had been grouped in front of the bunkhouse were members of Haydon's band; he knew the man who had escorted him to the Star had been deliberately stationed in the timber to watch for him. And he had no doubt that other outlaws had lain concealed along the trail to observe his move-ments.

He knew, too, that he had placed himself in a pre-carious predicament — that his life was in danger, and that he must be exceedingly careful.

Yet outwardly he was cool, composed. With Hay-don's eyes upon him he drew a chair to a point near the desk, seated himself in it, drew out paper and to-bacco, and rolled a cigarette. Lighting it, he puffed slowly, watching while Haydon dropped into the chair he had vacated at Harlan's appearance.

When Haydon dropped into his chair he grinned admiringly at Harlan.

"You're a cool one, Harlan," he said; "I've got to say that for you. But there's no use in four-flushing. You've come here to tell me something about the chain. Where did you find it?"

"At Sentinel Rock—not far from where you plugged Lane Morgan."

"You're assuming that I shot Morgan?" charged Haydon.

"Morgan was assumin', too, I reckon," grinned Harlan. "He told me it was you who shot him—he saw your face by the flash of your gun. An' he told me where to look for the chain—him not knowin' it was a chain—but somethin'."

Haydon's eyes gleamed with a cold rage—which he concealed by passing a hand over his forehead, veiling his eyes from Harlan. His lips were wreathed in a smile.

"Why didn't you tell me that the other day—the first time I met you?"

Harlan laughed. "I was havin' notions then—notions that I'd be playin' her a lone hand."

"And now?" Haydon's eyes were steady with cold inquiry.

"I've got other notions. I'm acceptin' Deveny's invitation to throw in with you."

Haydon was silent for an instant, and during the silence his gaze met Harlan's fairly. By the humorous gleam in Harlan's eyes Haydon divined that the man could not be misled—that he knew something of the

situation in the valley, and that he had come here with the deliberate intention of joining the outlaw band.

There was, as Haydon had intimated, little use for an attempt at equivocation or pretense. It was a situation that must be faced squarely by both himself and Harlan. Harlan's reputation, and his action in keeping secret from Barbara Morgan the identity of her father's murderer, indicated sincerity on the man's part. And since Harlan knew him to be the murderer of Morgan it would be absurd for Haydon to pretend that he had no connection with Deveny's band. He could not fool this man.

Yet a jealous hatred of Harlan was thinly concealed by the steady smile with which he regarded his visitor. He had felt the antagonism of Harlan that day when he had talked with him at the bunkhouse door; Harlan's manner that day had convinced him that Harlan was jealous of his attentions to Barbara Morgan. Also, there was in his heart a professional jealousy — jealousy of Harlan's reputation.

For this man who sat in his chair so calmly, with danger encompassing him, was greater than he. Haydon knew it. Had there been any doubt in his mind on that score it must have been removed by a memory of the manner in which his men had received the news that Harlan had left the Rancho Seco and was on his way up the valley.

The rider Harlan had seen had come in with that news — and Haydon had been standing with the group at the bunkhouse when the man arrived. And he had not failed to note the nervous glances of some of the

men, and the restless eagerness, not unmixed with anxiety, with which they watched the trail.

And now, facing Harlan, he felt the man's greatness —his especial fitness for the career he had adopted. Harlan was the ideal outlaw. He was cool, deep, subtle. He was indomitable; he felt no fear; his will was inflexible, adamant. Haydon felt it. The fear he had experienced at his first meeting with Harlan had endured until this minute — it was strong as ever.

Yet he admired the man; and knew that since he had come to the valley he must be considered an important factor. Haydon could not flatly tell him to get out of the valley; he could not order him away from the Rancho Seco. Harlan was in control there —for the rider who had come in with the news that Harlan had set out for the valley had also apprised Haydon of the coming, to the Rancho Seco, of the men of the T Down outfit.

The rider had not been able to tell Haydon who the men were, of course; but it made little difference. They were friends of Harlan's, for they had come from the direction of the desert — from Pardo.

It was plain to Haydon that Harlan had come to the valley to stay. It was equally plain that he must be either propitiated or antagonized. He felt that Harlan was giving him his choice.

"What do you want — if you throw in with us?" Haydon asked, following the trend of his own thoughts.

"That's straight talk," said Harlan. "I'm givin' you a straight answer. If I join your bunch I join on

the same footing with you an' Deveny — nothin' less. We split everything three ways — the other boys takin' their regular share after we take ours. I bring my boys in under the rules you've got that govern the others. I run the Rancho Seco — no one interferin'. When I rustle up that gold old Morgan hid, we split it three ways. Barbara Morgan goes with the ranch — no one interferin'."

Color surged into Haydon's face.

"You don't want much, do you?" he sneered.

"I want what's comin' to me — what I'm goin' to take, if I come in. That's my proposition. You can take it or leave it."

Haydon was silent for an instant, studying Harlan's face. What he saw there brought a frown to his own.

"Harlan," he said softly, "some of the boys feel a little resentful over the way you sent Dolver and Laskar out. There are several friends of those two men outside now. Suppose I should call them in and tell them that the bars are down on you — eh?"

If Haydon expected his threat to intimidate Harlan, he was mistaken. Harlan sat, motionless, watching the outlaw chief steadily. And into his eyes came a glitter of that cold contempt which Haydon had seen in them on the day he had faced Harlan near the bunkhouse at the Rancho Seco.

"You're doin' the honors, Haydon," he said. "If you're that kind of a coyote I don't want to deal with you. If you think you want to pass up a share of that hundred thousand, start yappin' to them boys. It's likely there's some of them hangin' around, close

Mebbe you've got some of them peekin' around corners at me now. I ain't runnin' from no trouble that comes my way. Get goin' if you're yearnin' to requisition the mourners."

Rage over the threat was now plain in his eyes, for they were aflame with a cold fire as he got up from his chair and stood, crouching a little, his hands lingering near the butts of his guns.

Haydon did not move, but his face grew pallid and he smiled nervously, with shallow mirth.

"You are not in a joking mood today, Harlan?" he said.

"There's jokes, *an'* jokes, Haydon. I've come here in good faith. I've been in camps like this before—in Kelso's, Dave Rance's, Blondy Larkin's, an' some others. Them men are outlaws—like you an' me; an' they've done things that make them greater than you an' me—in our line. But I've visited them, free and easy—goin' an' comin' whenever I pleased. An' no man threatenin' me.

"Your manners is irritatin' to me—I'm tellin' you so. I'm through! You're takin' me out, now—back to the Rancho Seco. You're ridin' behind me—minus your guns, your mouth shut tighter than you ever shut it before. An' if there's any shootin' you'll know it—plenty!"

Harlan had brought matters to a crisis—suddenly in a flash. The time for pretense had gone. Haydon could accept Harlan upon the terms he had mentioned or he could take up the man's challenge with all it implied—bitter warfare between the two factions, which

would be unprofitable to both, and especially to Haydon.

It was for Haydon to decide; and he sat for some seconds motionless in the chair, before he spoke.

Then he got up — taking care to keep his right hand at a respectable distance from the butt of his pistol, and smilingly held out his hand.

"It goes your way, Harlan — we take you in on your terms. I beg your pardon for saying what I did. That was just to try you out. I've heard a lot about you, and I wanted to see if you were in earnest — if you really wanted to come in. I'm satisfied."

They shook hands; their gaze meeting as they stood close together. The gaze endured for an instant; and then Haydon's fell. The handshake lasted for several seconds, and it was curious to see how Haydon's eyes, after they had become veiled from Harlan's by the drooping lids, glowed with a malignant triumph and cunning.

It was also curious to note that something of the same passion was revealed in Harlan's eyes as they rested on the partially closed lids of the other — for there was triumph there, too — and comprehension, and craft of a kind that might have disturbed Haydon, had he seen it.

Then their hands parted, mutually, and Haydon grinned smoothly and with apparent cordiality at Harlan. He grasped Harlan by an elbow and urged him toward the door through which the latter had entered.

"I'll give you a knockdown to the boys, now — those that are here," he said.

An hour later—after Haydon and the dozen men to whom he had introduced Harlan had watched Harlan ride eastward through the valley toward the Rancho Seco—Haydon rode westward, accompanied by several of the men.

They rode for many miles into the heart of the big basin, coming at last to a gorge that wound a serpentine way southward, through some concealing hills, into a smaller basin. A heavy timber clump grew at the mouth of the gorge, hiding it from view from the trail that ran through the valley. Some rank underbrush that fringed the timber gave the mouth of the gorge the appearance of a shallow cave, and a wall of rock, forming a ragged arch over the entrance, heightened the impression. At first glance the place seemed to be impenetrable.

But the horsemen filed through easily enough, and the underbrush closed behind them, so that, had they been seen, the watcher might have been startled by their sudden disappearance.

Near the center of the little basin stood a huge cabin, built of adobe, with a flat roof. In a small corral were a number of cattle. Grazing upon the grass, with which the place was carpeted, were many horses; and lounging in the grass near the cabin, and upon some benches that ranged its walls, were perhaps a dozen men, heavily armed.

Several of the men grinned as the newcomers rode in and dismounted, and one or two spoke a short greeting to Haydon, calling him "Chief."

Haydon did not linger to talk with the men, though;

he dismounted and entered the cabin, where, an instant later, he was talking with Deveny.

Haydon's eyes were still triumphant — glowing with a malignant satisfaction.

"He's wise — and dead tickled to join," he told Deveny, referring to Harlan. "And I took him in on his own terms. We'll play him along, making him believe he's regular and right, until we get what we want. Then we'll down him!"

At about the time Haydon was talking with Deveny, Harlan was dismounting at the Rancho Seco corral.

The T Down men were variously engaged — some of them in the corral; others in the stable, and still others in the blacksmith-shop — all attending to their new duties — and only Red Linton was at the corral gate to greet Harlan.

Triumph was in Harlan's eyes as he grinned at Linton.

"I'm a Simon-pure outlaw now, Red," he stated. "Haydon didn't hesitate none. He's a sneakin', schemin' devil, an' he hates me like poison. But he took me in, reckonin' to play me for a sucker. Looks like things might be interestin'." He grinned. "I'm yearnin' for grub, Red."

Later, while Harlan was seated at a table in the cook shanty, he became aware of a shadow at the door; and he wheeled, to see Barbara Morgan looking in at him, her face flushed, a glow in her eyes that was entirely comprehensible to Harlan.

She was glad he had returned — any man with half

Harlan's wisdom could have told that! And color of a kind not caused by the wind and sun suffused Harlan's face.

She had seen him from one of the kitchen windows, and curiosity—and an impatience that would not permit of delay—had brought her to search for him.

"Why," she said, "I—I thought—didn't you say that you were going away?"

"Didn't I go?" he grinned.

"For a day," she taunted, her voice leaping.

"A day," he said gravely; "why, it was longer than that, wasn't it? Seems that I ain't seen you for years an' years!"

He got up, his hunger forgotten. But when he reached the door he saw her running toward the ranch-house, not even looking back. He stood watching her until she opened a door and vanished. Then he grinned and returned to his neglected food, saying aloud, after the manner of men who spend much time in open places: "I'll sure take care of her, Morgan."

CHAPTER XX

LEFT-HANDED

HARLAN'S statement to Haydon, to the effect that he had visited the camps of Kelso, Rance, Larkin, and other outlaws had been strictly accurate. At one time or another each of those outlaw leaders had sent for Harlan, to endeavor to prevail upon him to cast his lot with them — so common was the report that Harlan was of their type.

And he had been able — as he had told Haydon — to go among them with impunity — unmolested, respected. And even after he had refused to join they had extended him the courtesy of faith — not even swearing him to secrecy. And he had vindicated their faith by keeping silent regarding them.

Knowing, however, that the ethics of men of the type of Kelso, Rance, Larkin, and others provided a safe conduct for any man of their kind that came among them, Harlan had felt contempt for Haydon for his threat. And yet Harlan's rage on that occasion had been largely surface; it had been displayed for effect — to force an instant decision from Haydon.

Harlan was aware that his only hope of protecting Barbara Morgan from Haydon and Deveny was in an offensive war. He could not expect to wage such a war by remaining idly at the Rancho Seco, to await the inevitable aggressions of the outlaws, for he did not know when they would strike, nor how. It was cer-

tain they would strike, and it was as certain they would strike when he least expected them to.

Therefore he had determined to join them, depending upon his reputation to allay any suspicion they might have regarding his motives. Haydon had taken him into the band, but Harlan had been convinced that Haydon distrusted him. He had seen distrust in Haydon's eyes; and he had known, when Haydon dropped his gaze at the instant they had shaken hands, that the man meditated duplicity.

Yet Harlan was determined to appear ignorant that Haydon meditated trickery. He intended to go among the men and deliberately to ignore the threatened dangers—more, to conduct himself in such a manner that Haydon would not suspect that he knew of any danger.

It had been a slight incident that had suggested the plan to him—merely a glance at Strom Rogers, while the latter, in Lamo, had been watching Deveny.

Harlan had seen hatred in Rogers' face, and contempt and jealousy; and he knew that where such passion existed it could be made to grow and flourish by suggestion and by example.

And he was determined to furnish the example.

He knew something of the passions of men of the type which constituted the band headed by Deveny and Haydon; he knew how their passions might be played upon; he was aware of their respect and admiration for men of notorious reputation, with records for evil deeds, and rapid "gunslinging."

He had seen how Strom Rogers had watched him—with awed respect; he had seen approval in Rogers'

eyes when they had exchanged glances in Lamo; and he had heard men in the group in front of the sheriff's office speaking of him in awed whispers.

He had never been affected by that sort of adulation — in Lamo or in the days that preceded his visit to the town. But he was not unmindful of the advantage such adulation would give him in his campaign for control of the outlaw camp. And that was what he had determined to achieve.

Three times in as many days he rode up the valley to the Star, each time talking with Haydon — then leaving the latter to go out and lounge around among the men, listening to their talk, but taking little part in it. He did not speak until he was spoken to, and thus he challenged their interest, and they began to make advances to him.

Their social structure was flimsy and thin, their fellowship as spontaneous as it was insincere; and within a few days the edge had worn off the strangeness that had surrounded Harlan, and he had been accepted with hardly a ripple of excitement.

And yet no man among them had achieved intimacy with Harlan. There was a cold constraint in his manner that held them off, figuratively, barring them from becoming familiar with him. Several of them tried familiarity, and were astonished to discover that they had somehow failed — though they had been repelled so cleverly that they could not resent it.

Harlan had established a barrier without them being aware of how he had done it — the barrier of authority and respect, behind which he stood, an en-

gaging, saturnine, interesting, awe-compelling figure.

At the end of a week the men of the Star outfit were addressing him as "boss;" listening to him with respect when he spoke, striving for his attention, and trying to win from him one of those rare smiles with which he honored those among them whose personalities interested him.

At the end of two weeks half of the Star outfit was eager to obey any order he issued, while the remainder betrayed some slight hesitation — which, however, vanished when Harlan turned his steady gaze upon them.

Behind their acceptance of him, though — back of their seeming willingness to admit him to their peculiar fellowship — was a reservation. Harlan felt it, saw it in their eyes, and noted it in their manner toward him. They had heard about him; they knew something of his record; reports of his cleverness with a weapon had come to them. And they were curious.

There was speculation in the glances they threw at him; there was some suspicion, cynicism, skepticism, and not a little doubt. It seemed to Harlan that though they had accepted him they were impatiently awaiting a practical demonstration of those qualities that had made him famous in the country. They wanted to be "shown."

Their wild, unruly passions and lurid imaginations were the urges that drove them — that shaped their conduct toward their fellows. Some of them were rapid gunslingers — in the picturesque idioms of their speech — and there was not a man among them who

did not take pride in his ability to "work" his gun. They had accepted Harlan, but it was obvious that among them were some that doubted the veracity of rumor—some who felt that Harlan had been overrated.

It did not take Harlan long to discover who those doubting spirits were. He saw them watching him—always with curling lip and truculent eye; he heard references to his ability from them—scraps of conversation in which such terms and phrases as "a false alarm, mebbe," "he don't look it," "wears 'em for show, I reckon," were used. He had learned the names of the men; there were three of them, known merely as "Lanky," "Poggs," and "Latimer."

Their raids upon the cattle in the basin took place at night; and their other depredations occurred at that time also. Harlan did not fail to hear of them, for their successes figured prominently in their daytime conversations; and he had watched the herd of cattle in the Star corrals grow in size until the enclosure grew too small to hold them comfortably. He had noted, too, the cleverness with which the men obliterated the brands on the stolen cattle—or refashioned them until proof of their identity was obscure.

He had taken no part in any of the raids, though he had passed a few nights at the Star, directing, with the help of Strom Rogers, the altering of the brands and the other work attending the disguising of the cattle.

Haydon he had seen but a few times, and Deveny not at all. He learned from Rogers that Haydon

spent most of his time upon mysterious missions which took him to Lamo, to Lazette, and to Las Vegas; and that Deveny operated from a place that Rogers referred to as the "Cache," several miles up the valley.

Latimer, a tawny giant of a man with a long, hooked nose, and thin, cruel lips, interested Harlan. He watched the man when the other was not conscious of his glances, noting the bigness of him, his slow, panther-like movements; the glowing, savage truculence of his eyes; the hard, bitter droop of his lips under the yellow mustache he wore. He felt the threat of the man when the latter looked at him — it was personal, intense — seeming to have motive behind it. It aroused in Harlan a responsive passion.

One day, seated on a bench in front of the long bunkhouse near the Star ranchhouse, Harlan was watching some of the men who were playing cards near him. They were lounging in the grass, laughingly pitting their skill against one another, while another group, in front of the stable, was diligently repairing saddles.

Apart from the two groups were Lanky, Poggs, and Latimer. They were standing near the corral fence, about a hundred feet from where Harlan sat. The subject of their talk was unpleasant, for their faces reflected the venomous passions that inspired it.

Latimer had been watching Harlan — his gaze boldly hostile and full of a hate that was unmistakable.

And Harlan had not been unaware of Latimer's gaze; he had noted the wolfish gleam in the other's

eyes — and because he was interested in Latimer, he watched him covertly.

But Harlan had betrayed no sign that he knew Latimer was watching him; and when he saw Strom Rogers coming toward him from the stable, he grinned at him and made room for him when the latter headed for the bench upon which Harlan was sitting.

"Lazy day," offered Rogers as he dropped on the bench beside Harlan; "not a heap doin'." He did not look at Harlan, but leaned forward, took up a cinch buckle that had been lying in the sand at his feet, and turned it idly over and over in his hands, apparently intent on its construction.

With his head down, so that even the card-players could not see his lips move, he whispered to Harlan:

"Don't let 'em see you know I'm talkin'! They're framin' up on you!"

Harlan grinned, shielding his lips with a hand that he passed casually over them.

"Meanin' Latimer — an' his friends?" he said.

"Yep. Latimer's jealous of you. Been jealous. Thinks he can match your gunplay — itchin' for trouble — bound to have it out with you. We was at the Cache last night, an' I heard him an' Deveny yappin' about it. Deveny's back of him — he's sore about the way you handed it to him in Lamo. Keep your eyes peeled; they're pullin' it off pretty soon. Latimer's doin' the shootin' — he's tryin' to work himself up to it. Be careful."

"I'm thankin' you." Harlan leaned back, crossed his legs, and stared off into space, the light in his eyes

becoming vacuous. He seemed not to be interested in Latimer and the other two, but in reality he saw them distinctly. But they had their backs to him now, and were slowly sauntering toward the stable door.

"So Deveny ain't admirin' me none?" he said to Rogers.

"Not scarcely. No more than a gopher is admirin' a side-winder."

"Latimer," said Harlan, "don't like my style of beauty either. I've been noticin' it. He's a mighty interestin' man. If I wasn't dead sure he ain't the kind of a guy which goes around shootin' folks in the back, I'd say he pretty near fits the description I got of the man who helped Dolver salivate my side-kicker, Davey Langan, over in Pardo — a couple of months ago."

Rogers' side glance was pregnant with a grim, unsmiling humor.

"So you've picked him out? I've been wonderin' how long it would take you."

The emotion that passed over Harlan was not visible. It might have been detected, however, by the slight leap in his voice.

"You an' Latimer is bosom friends, I reckon?"

"Shucks!"

Rogers' glance met Harlan's for a fleeting instant.

"This gang needs cleanin' up," said Rogers. He got up, and stood in front of Harlan, holding out the cinch buckle, as though offering it to the other. For both men had seen that Latimer had left his friends at the stable door and was coming slowly toward the bunkhouse.

"You'll have to be slick," warned Rogers. "He's comin'. I'll be moseyin' out of the way."

He moved slowly from the bench, passed the group of card-players, and walked to the ranchhouse, where he hung the cinch buckle on a nail driven into the wall of the building. Then he slowly turned, facing the bench upon which Harlan still sat, and toward which Latimer was walking.

It was evident that all of the men in the vicinity were aware of the threatened clash, for their manner, upon the approach of Latimer, indicated as much.

For weeks they had been eager to test the traditional quickness of Harlan with the weapons that swung at his hips — those weapons had been a constant irritation to some of them, and an object of speculation to all. And when the night before some of them had heard the whispered word that Latimer — with Deveny's sanction — indeed with Deveny's encouragement — was determined to clash with Harlan, they had realized that the moment for which they had yearned was at hand.

For they had seen in Harlan's eyes — and had felt in the atmosphere that surrounded the man — the certainty that he would not refuse the clash with Latimer. The only question in their minds concerning Harlan was that of his speed and accuracy. And so when they saw Latimer coming they ceased playing cards and sat, interestedly watching — alert to note how Latimer would bring about the clash, and how Harlan would meet it.

Latimer had nerved himself for the ordeal by talk-

ing with his friends. The will to kill Harlan had been in his heart for a long time, but he needed to reinforce it with an artificial rage. And, dwelling, with his friends, upon the irritating fact that Harlan had come among them to usurp authority to which he had no visible claim, he had succeeded in working his rage to a frenzy that took little account of consequences.

Yet Latimer would not have been able to reach that frenzy had he not been convinced that he was Harlan's master with the six-shooter. He really believed that Harlan had been overrated. He believed that because he wanted to believe it, and because his contempt for the man had bred that conviction in his heart.

Also, he thought he knew why Harlan had come to the Star — why he had joined the outlaw camp. And the night before, he had communicated that suspicion to Deveny. It was because Harlan knew he had been with Dolver when Davey Langan had been killed. Latimer thought he had seen a slight relief in Deveny's eyes when he had told the latter that, but he could not be sure, and it was not important.

The important thing was that he must kill Harlan — and he meant to do it. He would kill him fairly, if possible, thereby enhancing his reputation — but he was certain to kill him, no matter what the method.

That conviction blazed in his eyes as he came to a halt within a dozen paces of where Harlan was sitting. He had worked himself to such a pitch of rage that it gripped him like some strong fever — bloating his face, tensing his muscles, bulging his eyes.

Harlan had watched him; and his gaze was on the

other now with a steady, unwavering alertness that advertised his knowledge of what was impending. But he sat, motionless, rigid, waiting Latimer's first hostile movement.

Harlan had turned a very little when Latimer had begun his walk toward the bench; his right side was slightly toward the man, the leg partially extended; while the left leg was doubled under the bench—seemingly to give him leverage should he decide to rise.

But he gave no indication of meditating such a move. It was plain to the watchers that if he attempted it Latimer would draw his gun and begin to shoot.

Latimer was convinced also that Harlan would not attempt to rise. He had Harlan at a disadvantage, and he laughed loudly, sardonically, contemptuously as he stood, his right hand hovering close to his pistol holster, his eyes aflame with hate and passion.

"Keep a-settin', you buzzard's whelp!" he sneered; "keep a-settin'! Latimer's out to git you. You know it—eh? You've knowed it right along—pretendin' not to. 'Drag' Harlan—bah! Gunslinger with a record—an' caught a-settin'. Caught with the goods on, sneakin' in here, tryin' to ketch a man unawares.

"Bah! Don't I know what you're here for? It's me! You blowed Dolver apart for killin' that damned, slick-eyed pardner of yourn—Davey Langan. Do you want to know who sent Langan out? I'm tellin' you—it was me! Me—me!"

He fairly yelled the last words, and stiffened, hold-

ing the fingers of his right hand clawlike, above the butt of the holstered pistol.

And when he saw that Harlan did not move; that he sat there rigid, his eyes unblinking and expressionless; his right hand hanging limply at his side, near the partially extended leg; his left hand resting upon the thigh of the doubled leg—he stepped closer, watching Harlan's right hand.

For a space—while one might have counted ten—neither man moved a muscle. Something in Harlan's manner sent into Latimer's frenzied brain the message that all was not what it seemed—that Harlan was meditating some astonishing action. Ten seconds is not long, as times goes, but during that slight interval the taut nerves of Latimer's were twanged with a torturing doubt that began to creep over him.

Would Harlan never make that move? That question was dinned insistently into Latimer's ears. He began to believe that Harlan did not intend to draw.

And then——

"Ah!"

It was Latimer's lungs that breathed the ejaculation.

For Harlan's right hand had moved slightly upward, toward the pistol at his right hip. It went only a few inches; it was still far below the holster when Latimer's clawlike fingers descended to the butt of his own weapon. The thought that he would beat Harlan in a fair draw was in his mind—that he would beat him despite the confusion of the hesitating motion with which Harlan got his gun out.

Something was happening, though—something odd

and unexplainable. For though Latimer had seemed to have plenty of time, he was conscious that Harlan's gun was belching fire and death at him. He saw the smoke streaks, felt the bullets striking him, searing their way through him, choking him, weakening his knees.

He went down, his eyes wide with incredulity, filling with hideous self-derision when he saw that the pistol which had sent his death to him was not in Harlan's right hand at all, but in his left.

Harlan got up slowly as Latimer stretched out in the dust at his feet—casting one swift glance at the fallen man to satisfy himself that for *him* the incident was ended. Then, with the gaze of every man in the outfit upon him, he strode toward the stable, where Lanky and Poggs were standing, having witnessed the death of their confederate.

They stiffened to immobility as they watched Harlan's approach, knowing that for them the incident was not closed—their guilt plain in their faces.

And when Harlan halted in front of them they stood, not moving a muscle, their eyes searching Harlan's face for signs that they too, were to receive a demonstration of the man's uncanny cleverness.

"You was backin' Latimer's play," said Harlan, shortly. "I'm aimin' to play the string out. Pull—or I'll blow you apart!"

Poggs and Lanky did not "pull." They stood there, ghastly color stealing into their faces, their eyes wide with the knowledge that death would be the penalty of a hostile movement.

Harlan's pistol was again in its holster, and yet they had no desire to provoke the man to draw it. The furtive gleam in the eyes of both revealed the hope that gripped them — that some of the watchers would interfere.

But not a man moved. Most of them had been stunned by the rapidity of Harlan's action — by the deftness with which he had brought his left hand into use. They had received the practical demonstration for which they all had longed, and each man's manner plainly revealed his decision to take no part in what was transpiring.

They remained in their places while Harlan — understanding that Poggs and Lanky would not accept his invitation — spoke gruffly to them:

"This camp ain't got any room for skunks that go to framin' up on any of the boys. Today you done it to me — tomorrow you'd try to pull it off on some other guy.

"You're travelin' — pronto. You're gettin' your cayuses. Then you're hittin' the breeze away from here — an' not comin' back. That lets you out. Mosey!"

He stood watchful, alert, while the men roped their horses, got their "war-bags," from the bunkhouse, mounted, and rode away without looking back. Then he walked over to the bench where he had been sitting when Rogers had warned him of the plan to kill him; ordered several of the men to take Latimer's body away, and then resumed his place on the bench, where he rolled a cigarette.

Later, when the men who had gone with Latimer's body returned to the vicinity of the ranchhouse, Harlan was still sitting on the bench.

No man said a word to him, but he saw a new respect in the eyes of all of them — even in Rogers' gaze — which had not strayed from him for an instant during the trouble.

And a little later, when Rogers walked to the bench and sat beside him, the other men had resumed their various pastimes as though nothing had happened.

Again Rogers whispered to him, lowly, admiringly:

"This camp is yours, man, whenever you say the word!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE BLACK-BEARDED MAN

IT WAS Strom Rogers who indicated to the outlaws at the Star that henceforth Harlan was to exercise authority of a kind that had formerly been vested in Haydon and Deveny.

The corral was packed to suffocation with cattle, threatening the health of the animals; Deveny had sent no word from the Cache regarding the disposal of the stock, and Haydon's whereabouts were unknown.

Rogers had moved stock on his own initiative in former days — for he had been an able assistant to both leaders. And Rogers could have moved the stock out of the corral and to the point far south where the outlaws had always sold them.

But there was malice in Rogers' heart toward the two outlaw leaders, and a perverse devil lurked in him. For many months he had worshiped Barbara Morgan from a distance, vaguely aware that his passion for her could never be realized. But there was a spark of honesty and justice in Rogers despite his profession, and a sincere admiration for the girl that admitted of no thought of evil toward her.

He had almost betrayed his resentment to Deveny when in Lamo, on the day of the coming of Harlan, Deveny had boldly announced his intentions toward the girl; and it had been a dread of clashing with Dev-

eny that had kept him from interfering. The will to protect the girl had been in Rogers' mind, but he lacked the physical courage to risk his life for her.

This man who had boldly entered the outlaw camp, after first defying Deveny in Lamo, had made a stirring appeal to the good in Rogers; and he foresaw that trouble, in which Harlan had a chance to emerge victorious, was certain. And he had decided to align himself with the Pardo gunman.

Therefore, on this morning, when it was certain that the cattle in the corral must be moved, he deliberately refused to exercise his prerogative. Instead, he waited until after breakfast—when the men were congregated outside the bunkhouse door—when he was certain they would all hear him.

Harlan had come out, too. He had not visited the Rancho Seco for more than a week, fearing that his absence might jeopardize the advantage he had gained over the men through the killing of Latimer.

With the attention of all the men centered upon him, Rogers walked close to Harlan, speaking loudly:

"Them cattle ought to hit the trail, Harlan. It's up to you—you're the boss. Do we move 'em—an' where?"

A comprehensive light gleamed in Harlan's eyes.

"They move," he said shortly. "Drive them where you've been drivin' them."

As though he had been giving orders to the outlaws all his life, he briskly mentioned the names of the men who were to form the trail herd.

Not a man dissented. Those whose names were

called quickly detached themselves from the group, and sought the horse corral; where they roped their horses and began to make preparations to obey Harlan's order. And later, when the cattle were driven out of the corral, and the trail herd crew straggled behind them over the level that led southward, the men were grinning.

For Harlan had told them that their share of the spoils resulting from the sale of the cattle was to be materially increased. He had likewise told them that they might spend an extra day in "town" before their return.

Only one man besides Harlan remained at the Star after the herd vanished into the southern distance. That man was the black-bearded fellow who had escorted Harlan to the ranchhouse on the occasion of his first visit—Lafe Woodward.

This man's admiration for Harlan had never been concealed. He had stayed as close to Harlan as possible; and from his manner Harlan had divined that the man was eager to ingratiate himself.

Woodward stood near Harlan as the herd and the men vanished. He had grinned widely when, just before the outfit had departed, he had heard Rogers whisper to Harlan:

"You've made yourself solid with the bunch, for sure, by offerin' 'em a bigger divvy. They've been grumblin' about it for a long time. They're all sore at Haydon an' Deveny for bein' greedy. But you're sure cookin' up a heap of trouble with Haydon an' Deveny!"

Harlan grinned with grim mirthlessness. It had been his first opportunity to stir up dissension and strife in the outlaw camp, and he had taken instant advantage of it. He had created factional feeling, and he was prepared to accept the consequences.

And, later in the day, when he saw Haydon ride in, dismount and cast a surprised glance at the empty corral, he knew that the moment for which he had planned, had come.

Woodward was nowhere in sight; and Harlan, who had been in the blacksmith-shop, made himself visible to Haydon by stepping outside.

Haydon called to him, sharply; and Harlan walked slowly to where the outlaw chief stood, a saturnine grin on his face, his eyes alight with a cold humor that might have been illuminating to Haydon had he taken the trouble to look into them.

Haydon was laboring under some strong passion. He was suppressing it with an effort, but it showed in his tensed muscles and in his flushed face.

"Where are the cattle?" he demanded, his voice a trifle hoarse.

"They're headed for Willow Wells—where you've been sellin' them."

"By whose orders?" Haydon's voice was choked with passion.

"Mine," drawled Harlan. Harlan might have explained that the stock had been suffering in the crowded enclosure, thus assauging Haydon's wrath. But he gave no explanation—that would have been a revelation of eagerness to escape blame and the possible

consequences of his act. Instead of explaining he looked steadily into Haydon's eyes, his own cold and unblinking.

He saw Haydon's wrath flare up—it was in the heightened color that spread upward above the collar of his shirt; he saw the man's terrific effort at self-control; and his look grew bitter with insolence.

"What's botherin' you?" he said.

"The cattle—damn it!" shouted Haydon. "What in hell do you mean by sending them away without orders?"

"I'm havin' my say, Haydon. We agreed to split everything three ways. Authority to give orders goes with that. That was the agreement. A man's got to be either a captain or a private, an' I've never played second to any man. I ain't beginnin' now."

"Why, damn you!" gasped Haydon. His eyes were aglare with a terrible rage and hate; he stepped backward a little, bending his right arm, spreading the fingers.

Harlan had made no move, but the light in his eyes betrayed his complete readiness for the trouble that Haydon plainly meditated.

"Yes," he said, slowly, drawling his words, a little! "It's come to that, I reckon. You've got to flash your gun now, or take it back. No man cusses me an' gets away with it. Get goin'!"

Haydon stood, swaying from side to side, in the grip of a mighty indecision. The fingers of his right hand spread wider; the hand descended to a point nearer to his pistol holster.

There it poised, the fingers hooked, like the talons of some giant bird about to clutch a victim.

Had Haydon faced a man with less courage; had Harlan's iron control lacked that quality which permitted him to give an enemy that small chance for life which he always gave them, death might have reigned at the Star again. Haydon owed his life to that hesitation which had made Harlan famous.

And as the strained, tense seconds passed with both men holding the positions they had assumed, it seemed Haydon was slowly beginning to realize that Harlan was reluctant, was deliberately giving him a chance.

A change came over Haydon. The clawlike fingers began to straighten; imperceptibly at first, and then with a spasmodic motion that flexed the muscles in little jerks. The hand became limp; it dropped slowly to his side — down beyond the pistol holster. Then it came up, and the man swept it over his eyes, as though to brush away a vision that frightened him.

His face grew pale, he shuddered; and at last he stood, swaying a little, his mouth open with wonder for the phenomenal thing that had happened to him.

Harlan's voice, cold and expressionless, startled him:

"You wasn't meanin' to cuss me?"

"No!" The denial was blurted forth. Haydon grinned, faintly, with hideous embarrassment; the knowledge that he had been beaten, and that he owed his life to Harlan, was plain in his eyes.

He laughed, uncertainly, as he made an effort to stiffen his lagging muscles.

"I was a bit flustered, Harlan; I talked rather recklessly, I admit. You see, I've been used to giving orders myself. I was riled for a minute."

"That goes!" said Harlan, shortly. His voice had changed. The slow drawl had gone, and a snapping, authoritative sharpness had replaced it.

Haydon gazed at him with a new wonder. He sensed in Harlan's manner the consciousness of power, the determination to command. At a stroke, it seemed, Harlan had wrenched from him the right to rule. He felt himself being relegated to a subordinate position; he felt at this minute the ruthless force of the man who stood before him; he felt oddly impotent and helpless, and he listened to Harlan with a queer feeling of wonder for the absence of the rage that should have gripped him.

"I'm runnin' things from now on," Harlan said. "I ain't interferin' with the Star. But I'm runnin' things for the boys. I told Rogers to drive the cattle to Willow's Wells — an' to sell them. I've promised the boys a bigger divvy. They get it. I've told them to take a day off, in town, after they turn the cattle over.

"There's got to be a new deal. The boys are fussed up — claimin' they ain't gettin' their share. I'm seein' that they do. You can't run a camp like this an' not treat the boys right."

The wonder that had been aroused in Haydon grew as Harlan talked; it increased in intensity until, when Harlan's voice died away, it developed into suspicion.

That was what Harlan had come to the Star for!

He wanted to run the camp, to direct the activities of the outlaws in the valley. Power! Authority! Those were the things Harlan craved for.

Haydon saw it all, now. He saw that Harlan wanted to dominate — everything. He wanted to rule the outlaw camp; he wanted to run the Rancho Seco; he intended to get possession of the gold that Morgan had left, and he wanted Barbara Morgan.

The rage that had held Haydon in its clutch when he had called Harlan to him was reviving. Haydon's face was still white, but the fury in his eyes — slowly growing — was not to be mistaken.

Harlan saw it, and his lips straightened. He had expected Haydon would rage over what he had determined to tell him; and he was not surprised. He had deliberately goaded the man into his present fury. He had determined to kill him, and he had been disappointed when he had seen Haydon lose his courage when the crisis arrived. And now his deliberate and premeditated plan was to bear fruit.

Harlan was reluctant to kill, but there seemed to be no other way. Haydon was a murderer. He had killed Lane Morgan; he was an outlaw whose rule had oppressed the valley for many months. If Harlan could have devised some plan that would make it possible for him to attain his end without killing anybody, he would have eagerly adopted it.

But in this country force must be fought with force. It was a grim game, and the rules were inflexible — kill or be killed.

His own life would be safe in this section so long

as he guarded it. Eternal vigilance and the will to take life when his own was threatened was a principle which custom had established. If he expected to save the girl at the Rancho Seco he could not temper his actions with mercy. And he knew that if he was to succeed in his design to disrupt the outlaw gang he would have to remove the man who stood before him, working himself into a new frenzy. There seemed to be no other way.

But Haydon seemed to have control of himself, now, despite the frenzied glare of his eyes. He was outwardly cool; his movements were deliberate—he had conquered his fear of Harlan, it seemed.

He laughed, harshly.

"Harlan," he said; "you had me going—talking that way. By Heaven! you almost convinced me that I'd *let* you run things here. I was beginning to believe I'd lost my nerve. But see here!"

He held out his right hand toward Harlan—it was steady, rigid, not a nerve in it quivered.

"You're fast with your guns, but you can't run any whizzer in on me—you can't intimidate me. You killed Latimer the other day; and you've got the boys with you. But you can't run things here. Have all the boys gone?"

"Woodward's here."

Harlan spoke lowly; his eyes were keenly watchful. This flare-up on Haydon's part was merely a phase of his confused mental condition. He saw that Haydon did not mean to use his gun—that he intended to ignore it, no doubt planning to regain his authority when

the men of the outfit returned—when he might enlist the support of some of them.

"Woodward's here—eh?" laughed Haydon. He raised his voice, shouting for the man. And Harlan saw Woodward come from behind an outbuilding, look toward the ranchhouse, and then walk slowly toward them.

Woodward halted when within several paces of the two, and looked from one to the other curiously, his eyes narrowed with speculation.

"Woodward," directed Haydon; "hit the breeze after the outfit and tell them to drive those cattle back here!"

Harlan grinned. "Woodward," he said, gently; "you climb on your cayuse an' do as Haydon tells you. Haydon is figurin' on cashin' in when you do."

Haydon blustered. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that if Woodward goes after the boys I'm goin' to blow you apart. I'm givin' the orders around here!"

Watching Haydon, Harlan saw that he was not exhibiting rage, but intense interest. He was not looking at Harlan, but at Woodward. And, turning swiftly, his guns both leaping into his hands with the movement—for he had a swift suspicion that Woodward might be standing with Haydon against him—he saw that Woodward had fallen into a crouch; that the man's right hand was hovering over his pistol holster, and that his eyes were gleaming with a light that could mean only the one thing—murder.

Backing slowly away from both Haydon and Wood-

ward, Harlan watched them, his guns ready for instant action should he catch any sign that would indicate trickery toward himself.

He saw no such signs. It became plain to him that Woodward had no eyes for anyone but Haydon, and that Haydon's attention was fixed upon Woodward with an intentness that meant he had divined that Woodward's peculiar manner had a definite, personal meaning.

Woodward continued to advance on Haydon. He was waving his left hand as though giving Harlan a silent order to get out of his way, while his gaze was centered upon Haydon with an unspoken promise of violence, fascinating to behold.

It seemed to have fascinated Haydon. Harlan saw him shrink back, the bluster gone out of him, his face the color of ashes. He kept stepping back, until he brought up against the rear wall of the ranchhouse; and there he stood, watching Woodward, his eyes bulging with dread wonder.

Harlan saw his lips move; heard his voice, hoarse and throaty:

"It's a frame-up — a frame-up. Both of you are out to get me!"

"Frame-up!"

This was Woodward. He was a sinister figure with his black beard seeming to bristle with passion, his eyes flaming with it; all his muscles tensed and quivering, and his right hand, with clawlike fingers, poised above the butt of his pistol.

"Frame-up!" he repeated, laughing hoarsely be

tween his teeth. "Hell's fire! Do you think it takes *two* men to 'get' you—you miserable whelp?

"I've been waitin' for this day—waitin' for it, waitin' to get you alone—waitin' for the boys to go so's I could tell you somethin'.

"You know what it is. You ain't guessin', eh? Listen while I tell you somethin'. The day 'Drag' Harlan got in Lamo he brought news that Lane Morgan had been killed out in the desert. I heard the boys sayin' you had a hand in it. But I thought that was just talk. I didn't believe you was that kind of a skunk. I waited.

"Then you sent me over to the edge of the level, near the Rancho Seco—where Harlan found that flattened grass when he rode over here. You told me to watch Harlan and Barbara Morgan. You said you thought Harlan would try some sneak game with her.

"You can gamble I watched. I saw Harlan standin' guard over her; I saw him follow that sneak Lawson. I heard the shot that killed Lawson, an' I saw Harlan tote him downstairs, an' then set on the doorsill all night, guardin' Barbara Morgan.

"The sneakin' game was played by you, Haydon. When I saw Harlan headin' toward the valley the day he come here, I lit out ahead of him. And when he got to the timber over there I brought him in.

"An' I heard you talk that day. I heard him sayin' that you killed Lane Morgan. He said my dad told him you fired the shot that killed him."

Harlan started and leaned forward, amazed. But

Haydon swayed, and then steadied himself with an effort, and stared at Woodward with bulging, incredulous eyes.

"Your *dad?*" he almost shrieked; "Lane Morgan was your father?"

Woodward's grin was wolfish. He took two or three steps toward Haydon—panther-like steps that betrayed the lust that was upon him.

"I'm Billy Morgan," he said, his teeth showing in a merciless grin; "Barbara's brother. Flash your gun, Haydon; I'm goin' to kill you!"

Haydon clawed for his pistol, missing the butt in his eagerness, and striving wildly to draw it. It snagged on a rawhide thong that supported the holster and his fingers were loosening in the partial grip when Billy Morgan shot him.

He flattened against the wall of the ranchhouse for an instant, staring wildly around him; then his head sagged forward and he slid down the wall of the ranchhouse into the deep dust that was mounded near it.

CHAPTER XXII

A DEAD MAN WALKS

HARLAN had paid strict attention to Lane Morgan's words at Sentinel Rock, and he remembered that Morgan had told him that his son, whom he had called "Bill," had left the Rancho Seco on some mission for the governor. Evidently it had not occurred to Morgan that his son's mission had taken him only to the valley in which reigned those outlaws Morgan had reviled.

But it was plain to Harlan that "Billy" was here—he had said so himself, and he had given proof that he had been watchful and alert to Barbara's interests. And now was explained young Morgan's interest in himself. The thought that during all the days he had spent at the Rancho Seco, his movements had been watched by the man who had just killed Haydon, brought a glow of ironic humor to Harlan's eyes.

During a long interval, through which Billy Morgan stood over Haydon, watching him with a cold savagery, Harlan kept at a respectable distance, also watching.

He saw that for Haydon the incident had been fatal. The man's body did not move after it slipped to the ground beside the ranchhouse wall. Yet Morgan watched until he was certain; then he slowly wheeled and looked at Harlan.

"That settles him—damn him!" he said, with a

breathlessness that told of the intense strain he had been laboring under.

Still Harlan did not speak; and his guns were in their holsters when Morgan walked close to him, grinning wanly.

"I had to do it. There's no use tryin' to depend on the law in this country. You've seen that, yourself."

"I've noticed it," grinned Harlan. "You're feelin' bad over it. I wouldn't. If it had been my dad he killed I couldn't have done any different. I reckon any man with blood in him would feel that way about a coyote like that killin' his father. If men don't feel that way, why do they drag murderers to courts—where they have courts—an' ask the law to kill them. That's just shovin' the responsibility onto some other guy.

"I've handed several guys their pass-out checks, an' I ain't regrettin' one of them. There wasn't one of them that didn't have it comin' to him. They was lookin' for it, mostly, an' had to have it. I've heard of guys that had killed a man feelin' squeamish over it—with ghosts visitin' them at night; an' sufferin' a lot of mental torture. I reckon any man would feel that way if he'd killed an inoffensive man—or a good man, or one that hadn't been tryin' to murder *him.*" He grinned again. "Why, I'm preachin'!"

And now into his gaze as he looked at Morgan, came cold reproach.

"You wasn't figurin' to let Barbara play it a lone hand?" he said.

"Hell's fire—no!" denied Morgan, his eyes blazing. "I've been watchin' the Rancho Seco—as I told Haydon. I saw Barbara set out for Lamo. There was no one followin' her, an' so I thought she'd be all right. That mixup at Lamo slipped me. But I seen you an' Barbara come back, an' I heard the boys talkin' about what happened at Lamo. I'd heard of you, too; an' when I seen you come back with Barbara I watched you. An' I seen you was square, so I trusted you a heap.

"An' I had a talk with Sheriff Gage about you, an' he told me my dad had sent to Pardo for you, through Dave Hallowell, the marshal of Pardo. Gage said you was out to clean up Deveny an' Haydon, an' so I knowed I could depend on you."

"Barbara don't know you're hangin' around here—she ain't known it?"

"Shucks, I reckon not," grinned Morgan. "I didn't come here for six months after I left the Rancho Seco—until I growed a beard. Barbara's been within a dozen feet of me, an' never knowed me. I've been thinkin' of telling her, but I seen Haydon was sweet on her, an' I didn't dare tell her. Women ain't reliable. She'd have showed it some way, an' then there'd have been hell to pay."

"An' I've been pridin' myself on takin' care of Barbara," said Harlan. "I feel a heap embarrassed an' useless—just like I'd been fooled."

"You've done a thing I couldn't do," confessed Morgan; "you've busted Haydon's gang wide open. If you hadn't showed up there'd have been nothin'

done. There's some of the boys that ain't outlaws—boys that are with me, havin' sneaked into the gang to help me out. But we wan't makin' no headway to speak of."

Harlan looked at Haydon. "That guy was educated," he said. "What was his game? I've felt all along that there was somethin' big back of him—that he wasn't here just to steal cattle an' rob folks, an' such."

"You ain't heard," smiled Morgan. "Of course you wouldn't—unless Gage had gassed to you.

"There's a gang of big men in Frisco, an' in the East, figurin' to run a railroad through the basin. A year or so ago there was secret talk of it in the capital. It leaked out that the railroad guys was intendin' to run their road through the basin. They was goin' to build a town right where the Rancho Seco lays; an' they was plannin' to irrigate a lot of the land around there. The governor says it was to be big—an' likely it'll be big, when they get around to it.

"But them things go slow, an' a gang of cheap crooks got wise to it. They sent Haydon down here, to scare the folks in the basin into sellin' out for a song. They've scared one man out—a Pole from the west end. But the others have stuck. Looks like they was figurin' on grabbin' the Rancho Seco without payin' *anything* for it—Haydon intendin', I reckon, to put dad an' me out of the way an' marry Barbara. Then he could have cut the ranch up into town lots an' made a mint of coin."

"An' Deveny?"

"Deveny's a wolf. Haydon brought him here from Arizona — where he'd terrorized a whole county, runnin' it regardless. He figured to cash in, I reckon, but he's been grabbin' up everything he could lay his hands on, on the way."

"You'll be tellin' Barbara, now?" suggested Harlan.

"You're shoutin'!" said Morgan, his eyes glowing. "I'm hittin' the breeze to the Rancho Seco for fair." He looked at Haydon, and his eyes took on a new expression. "I was almost forgettin' what the governor sent me here for," he added. "The governor was wantin' to know who is behind Haydon an' Deveny, an' I'm rummagin' around in Haydon's office to find out. Goin'?" he invited.

Both looked down at Haydon as they passed him, and an instant later they were entering a door of the ranchhouse.

They had hardly disappeared when Haydon's head moved slightly.

His eyes were open; he glanced at the door of the ranchhouse through which Harlan and Morgan had entered. Then he raised his head, dragged himself to an elbow — upon which he rested momentarily, his face betraying the bitter malignance and triumph that had seized him.

He had realized that Morgan had meant to kill him, even before Morgan had revealed his identity, and his backward movement, which had brought him against the wall of the ranchhouse had been made with design. He had felt that even if he should succeed in

beating Morgan, Harlan would have taken up the quarrel, for he knew that Harlan also had designs on his life. And with a cupidity aroused over the desperate predicament in which he found himself, he had decided to take a forlorn chance.

Morgan's bullet had struck him, but by a convulsive side movement at the instant Morgan's gun roared Haydon had escaped a fatal wound, and the bullet had entered his left side above the heart, paralyzing one of the big muscles of the shoulder.

His left arm was limp and useless, and dragged in the dust as he squirmed around and gained his feet. There was no window in the wall of the ranchhouse on that side; and he backed away, staggering a little, for he had lost much blood. He kept the blank wall before him as he backed away from the house; and when he reached his horse he was a long time getting into the saddle. But he accomplished it at last; and sent the horse slowly up the slope and into the timber out of which Harlan had ridden with the black-bearded man on the day of his first visit to the Star.

Back where the trail converged with the main trail that ran directly up the valley, Haydon, reeling in the saddle, sent his horse at a faster pace, heading it toward the Cache where he was certain he would find Deveny. And as he rode the triumph in his eyes grew. For he had heard every word of the conversation between Harlan and Morgan, and he hoped to get to the Cache before the two men discovered the trick he had played upon them — before they could escape.

CHAPTER XXIII

DEVENY SECEDES

SINCE the day he had heard that Harlan had appeared at the Star and had been taken into the outlaw band by Haydon, Deveny had exhibited fits of a sullen moroseness that had kept his closest friends from seeking his companionship. Those friends were few, for Deveny's attitude toward his men had always been that of the ruthless tyrant; he had treated them with an aloofness that had in it a contempt which they could not ignore. More—he was merciless, and had a furious temper which found its outlet in physical violence.

Deveny was a fast man with the big Colt that swung at his hip, a deadly marksman, and he needed but little provocation to exhibit his skill. For that reason his men kept the distance Deveny had established between them—never attempting familiarity with him.

Deveny had heard from a Star man the story of Harlan's coming to the Star and when a day or so later Haydon rode into the Cache, Deveny was in a state of furious resentment.

There had been harsh words between Haydon and Deveny; the men of the Cache had no difficulty in comprehending that Deveny's rage was bitter.

Not even when Haydon told him that his acceptance of Harlan had been forced by circumstances, and that he was tricking Harlan into a state of fancied security

in which he could the more easily bring confusion upon him did Deveny agree.

"You're a damned fool, Haydon!" he told the other, his face black with passion. "That guy is slick as greased lightning—and faster. And he don't mean any good to the camp. He's out for himself."

Deveny did not intimate that his dislike of Harlan had been caused by the latter's interference with his plans the day he had held Barbara Morgan a prisoner in the room above the Eating-House in Lamo; but Haydon, who had heard the details of the affair from one of his men, smiled knowingly.

It was not Haydon's plan to let Deveny know he knew of the affair, or that he cared about it if he had heard. And so he did not mention it.

But in his heart was a rage that made his thoughts venomous; though he concealed his emotions behind the bland, smooth smile of good-natured tolerance.

"I'll handle him, Deveny," he said as he took leave of the other. "He'll get his when he isn't expecting it."

Deveny, however, had no faith in Haydon's ability to "handle" Harlan. He had seen in the man's eyes that day in Lamo something that had troubled him—an indomitability that seemed to indicate that the man would do whatever he set out to do.

But Deveny did not ride to the Star to see Harlan; he was reluctant to stir outside the Cache, and for many days, while Harlan was attaining supremacy at the Star, and while Haydon was absent on a mysterious mission, Deveny kept close to the Cache, nursing

his resentment against Haydon, and deepening — with fancied situations — his hatred for Harlan.

It did not surprise Deveny when a Star man rode into the Cache one day and told him that Harlan had killed Latimer in a gun-fight, and that Harlan was slowly but surely gaining a following among the men. The information did not surprise Deveny; but it sent his mind into a chaos of conjecture and speculation, out of which at last a conviction came — that Harlan was seeking control of the outlaw band; that Haydon's days as a leader were almost over, so far as he was concerned. For if Haydon insisted on taking Harlan into the secret councils of the camp he — Deveny — was going to operate independently.

The more his thoughts dwelt upon that feature the more attractive it seemed to him. Independence of Haydon meant that he could do as he pleased without the necessity of consulting anybody. He could rustle whatever cattle he wanted — getting them where he could without following Haydon's plans — which had always seemed rather nonsensical, embracing as they did the scheme of railroad building and town sites; and he could do as he pleased with Barbara Morgan, not having to consider Haydon at all.

It was that last consideration that finally decided Deveny. He was an outlaw — not a politician; he robbed for gain, and not for the doubtful benefits that might be got out of the building of a town. And when he looked with desire upon a woman he didn't care to share her with another man — not even Haydon.

For two or three days after the conviction seized

Deveny, he pondered over his chances, and when he reached a decision he acted with the volcanic energy that had characterized his depredations in the basin.

On the morning of the day upon which Haydon returned to the Star to find the cattle gone and Harlan in control, Deveny appeared to a dozen Cache men who were variously engaged near the corral, ordering them to saddle their horses.

Later, Deveny and his men rode southward across a low plateau that connected the buttes near the entrance to the Cache with the low hills that rimmed the basin. They traveled fast, and when they reached the rimming hills they veered eastward upon a broad sand plain.

There was a grin on Deveny's face now—a grin which expressed craft, duplicity, and bestial desire. And as he rode at the head of his men he drew mental pictures that broadened his grin and brought into his eyes an abysmal gleam.

CHAPTER XXIV

KIDNAPPED

BARBARA MORGAN had yielded to the fever of impatience which had afflicted her during the latter days of Harlan's absence from the Rancho Seco. She had been impatient ever since she had been forced to stay close to the house by Harlan's orders; but she had fought it off until now, for she had been interested in Harlan, and had felt a deep wonder over his probable actions regarding her future.

She had known, of course, that real danger from Deveny existed, for the incident in Lamo had convinced her of that, but she felt that Harlan's fears for her were rather extravagant — it was rather improbable that Deveny would come boldly to the Rancho Seco and attempt to carry her away by force.

The clear, brilliant sunshine of the country dispelled so grotesque a thought; the peaceful hills seemed to smile their denial; and the broad level near the entrance to the basin sent a calm message of reassurance to her.

She had known Red Linton for a long time — for he had been with her father for nearly two seasons — and she had respected him for what he had seemed to be, a quiet, rather humorous man who did his work well, though without flourishes. He had never figured prominently in her thoughts, however, until the day Harlan had appointed him foreman of the Rancho

Seco, and then her attention had been attracted to him because he had seemed interested in her.

And she had noted that Linton's interest in her seemed to grow after Harlan's departure. He had talked with her several times, and she had questioned him about Harlan's whereabouts. But Linton had not seemed to know; at least, if he did know, he kept his knowledge strictly to himself, not even intimating that he knew where Harlan had gone.

Another thing she noted was that Linton seemed to have her under surveillance. Whenever she left the house—even for a short ride eastward—where Harlan had told her she might ride without danger—she discovered that Linton immediately mounted his horse, to linger somewhere in sight.

The knowledge that she was watched began to irritate her and this morning she had got up with a determination to ride without company. With that end in view she had kept Billy all night in the *patio;* and when rather late in the morning she saw Linton riding eastward, she hurriedly threw saddle and bridle on the horse and rode westward, toward the big basin.

She kept the house between her and the point where she had seen Linton—until a turn northward became inevitable; and then she urged Billy to a faster pace, in an endeavor to cross the wide plain that reached to the entrance to the basin before Linton could see her.

Many times during the days before the coming of Deveny and Haydon to the valley she had ridden there; it had been a place in which reigned a mighty

silence which she had loved, which had thrilled her. During those other days she was in the habit of riding to a point several miles up the valley — between the little basin where the Star was now and the Rancho Seco.

The trail led upward in a slow, gradual slope to that point — a rugged promontory that jutted out from a mesa that rose above the floor of the valley. The mesa was fringed at the southern edge with stunt oak and nondescript brush. But there were breaks in the fringe which permitted her to ride close to the edge of the mesa; and from there she could look many miles up the valley — and across it, where the solemn hills rimmed the southern horizon, to a trail — called the South Trail by cattlemen in the valley, to distinguish it from the main trail leading through the mighty hollow in which she rode.

When she reached the mesa she headed Billy directly for the break on the promontory. Dismounting, she stretched her legs to disperse the saddle weariness; then she found a huge rock which had been the seat from which she had viewed the wondrous landscape in the past.

The reverent awe with which she had always viewed the valley was as strong in her today as it had ever been — stronger, in fact, because she had not seen the place for some time, and because in her heart there now dwelt a sadness that had not been there in those other days — at least since her mother had died.

She was high above the floor of the valley; and she could see the main trail below her weaving around low

mounds and sinking into depressions; disappearing into timber groves, reappearing farther on, disappearing again, and again reappearing until it grew blurred and indistinct in her vision.

In the marvelous clarity of the atmosphere this morning every beauteous feature of the valley was disclosed to her inspection. The early morning haze had lifted, and the few fleecy clouds that floated in the blue bowl of sky were motionless, their majestic billows glowing in the sun. She saw a Mexican eagle swoop over the cloud, sailing on slow wing high above it, and growing so distant in her vision that he became a mere speck moving in the limitless expanse of space.

It was a colossal landscape, and its creator had neglected no detail. And it was harmonious, from the emerald green that carpeted the floor of the valley near the gleaming river to the gigantic shoulders of the rugged hills that lifted their huge, bastioned walls into the blue of the sky. Some tall rock spires that thrust their peaks skyward far over on the southern side of the valley had always interested her; they seemed to be sentinels that guarded the place, hinting of an ages-old mystery that seemed to reign all about them.

But there was mystery in everything in the valley she felt; for it lay before her, spreading, slumbrous, basking in the brilliant sunlight—seeming to wait as it seemed to have waited from the dawn of the first day, for man to wonder over it.

She saw the Mexican eagle again after a while. He was making a wide circle beyond the rock spires, float-

ing lazily above them in long, graceful swoops that were so lacking in effort that she longed to be up there with him — to ride the air with him, to feel the exhilaration he must feel.

As she looked, however, she caught a faint blur on the southern horizon of the big picture — a yellowish-black cloud that hugged the horizon and traveled rapidly eastward. It was some time before she realized that what she saw was a dust cloud, and there were men in it — horsemen.

She got up from the rock, her face slowly whitening. And into her heart came a presentiment that those men in the dust cloud were abroad upon an errand of evil.

No doubt the presentiment was caused from the dread and fear she had lived under for days — the consciousness that Deveny was in the valley, and a recollection of the warnings that Harlan had given her. And she knew the horsemen could not be Rancho Seco men — for they had gone southward from the ranch, and there was no grass range where the horsemen were riding. Also, the men were riding eastward, toward the Rancho Seco.

Trembling a little with apprehension, she mounted Billy and sent him down the slope to the floor of the valley. The descent was hazardous, and Billy did not make good time, but when he reached the level at the foot of the slope he stretchd his neck and fell into a steady, rapid pace that took him down the valley swiftly.

As the girl rode, the presentiment of evil increased,

and she grew nervous with a conviction that she would not be able to reach the Rancho Seco much in advance of the men. For she could see them more clearly now, because they were in the valley, traveling a shelving trail that sloped down from the hills toward the level that stretched to the ranchhouse.

It was several miles from where she rode to the point where the horsemen were riding, and she was traversing a long ridge which must have revealed her to the men if they looked toward her.

She had thought—after she had left the promontory—of concealing herself somewhere in the valley, to wait until she discovered who the men were and what their errand was; but she had a fear that if the men were Deveny's outlaws they might return up the valley and accidentally come upon her. Also, she had yielded to the homing instinct which is strong in all living beings, for at home was safety that could not be found elsewhere.

The South Trail, she knew, converged with the valley trail at the edge of the level. If she could reach that point a few minutes before the horsemen reached it she would rely on Billy to maintain his lead. Billy would have to maintain it!

Leaning far over Billy's mane she urged him on, coaxing him, flattering him, calling to him in terms of endearment. And the loyal little animal did his best, running as he had never run before.

Barbara though, watching the horsemen with eyes into which there had come a glow of doubt, began to realize that Billy was losing the race. Also, by

the time she had gone four or five miles, she discovered that the men had seen her. For the trails were growing close together now—not more than half a mile of slightly broken country stretched between them, and she could see the men waving their hats; could hear their voices above the whir and clatter of Billy's passing.

Still, she was determined to win, and Billy's flanks felt the sting of the quirt that, hitherto, had swung from Barbara's wrist.

Billy revealed a marvelous burst of speed. But it did not last, and the horsemen, after hanging for an instant abreast of Billy, began to forge ahead.

The courageous little animal had almost reached the covert that Harlan had discovered the day he had visited the Star the first time, and was nobly answering the stern urge of the quirt when another horseman suddenly appeared on the trail directly ahead of the girl, seemingly having ridden out of the covert.

The trail was narrow, and Billy could not swerve around the new rider. So, sensing the danger of a collision he stiffened his legs, making a sliding halt that carried him a dozen feet, leaving him upon his haunches with Barbara frantically trying to keep to the saddle.

Then Billy's forehoofs came down; he grunted, heaved a tremendous sigh and stood, his legs braced, awaiting orders.

No order came. For no words escaped Barbara's lips. She sat in the saddle, her face ashen, terror clutching her.

For the horseman who had ridden out of the covert was Stroud, the Rancho Seco straw-boss. He was grinning, and in his eyes was a gloating triumph that she could not mistake.

"Lucky I took a notion to come in this mornin'," he said. "I just got here. I seen you hittin' the breeze for fair while you was quite a piece up the basin; an' I seen Deveny an' the boys a-fannin' it, too. An' I says to myself: 'Stroud, here's Deveny racin' to see Miss Barbara, an' her actin' like she don't want to see him. But I'll fix it so she does.'"

The girl touched Billy with the quirt, and the little animal lunged forward, close to Stroud's horse. As the two beasts came close together Barbara struck at Stroud with the quirt, hoping to disconcert him so that she could send Billy past him.

Stroud ducked and shot a hand out, seized the quirt and wrenched it from her hand. She screamed as the hairloop scraped the flesh of her wrist. And then she heard a thundering clatter of hoofs and saw Deveny and his men appear from beyond the covert and race toward her.

Deveny spoke no word. But as he rode toward her she saw the gleam in his eyes, and she silently fought Stroud, who had grasped her and was pulling her toward him.

It seemed to her that Deveny must have misunderstood Stroud's action, for it was clear to her — even in the stress and confusion of the moment — that Deveny thought Stroud had attacked her through motives that were strictly personal.

Anyway, before Stroud could speak Deveny's pistol glittered. And malignantly, his eyes blazing with a jealous, evil light, he shot Stroud — twice.

He sat in the saddle, his lips twitching into a sneer as he watched the straw-boss tumble from his horse and fall limply into the grass. Then with a smile that was hideous with a triumphant passion, he spurred his horse to Billy's side, pulled the girl from the saddle, and sent his horse up the valley, motioning his men to follow.

CHAPTER XXV

AMBUSHED

RED LINTON had ridden eastward to examine the grass of the range in that direction, for it had been some days since he had sent Stroud to the southern range, and since the cattle had been there for some time before that Linton felt they should be driven to fresh grass.

And yet, perhaps, Linton's search for good grass should not have taken him so far from the ranchhouse, for he remembered his promise to Harlan that he would not let Barbara out of his sight. But Barbara had made no objection to his guardianship of her, so far, and he had longed for a ride.

He worried a little, though, and felt guilty of something very like treason to Harlan; and at last, not being able to ride farther with the thoughts that fought with his desires, he wheeled his horse and sent it scampering back toward the ranchhouse.

When he reached the ranchhouse he saw none of the men, for he had set them at tasks inside the buildings; and he rode down to the ranchhouse, resolved to have a talk with the girl.

When he rode around the near corner he saw that the *patio* gate was open. His horse leaped with the stern word he spoke to it, bringing him swiftly to the gate, where he dismounted and threw open a door that led into the house.

He called to Barbara, and receiving no answer, he ran from room to room, not hesitating until he had explored them all.

Emerging from the house, he mounted his horse and sent him westward, while he scanned the big level around him for sight of the girl.

She had always ridden into the valley in former days, he remembered—and during the days of his guardianship she had more than once threatened to ride there. And he had no doubt she had gone there now, out of perverseness, just to irritate him.

He held his horse to a rapid pace as he crossed the level, and he was still a mile distant from the covert where Barbara had met Stroud when he saw a group of horsemen traveling rapidly up the valley.

Linton rode on, his anxiety acute, a grave suspicion afflicting him. And when, after he had ridden a little farther, he saw Barbara's horse trotting slowly toward him, the stirrups swinging and flopping emptily against the saddle skirts, he drew a deep breath and brought his own horse to a halt, while he sat motionless in the saddle, tortured by bitter thoughts.

He had no doubt that what Harlan feared would happen, had happened—that Deveny had come for Barbara. And Deveny had found her, through *his* dereliction. He had relaxed his vigilance for only a short time, and during that time Deveny had come.

Linton looked back toward the Rancho Seco. The distance to the ranchhouse seemed to be interminable. He looked again up the valley, and saw that the horsemen were growing indistinct. Within a few minutes,

so rapid was their pace, they would vanish altogether.

Linton thought of going back to the ranchhouse for the other men — that was why he had looked in that direction. But if he wished to keep the horsemen in sight he would not have time to get the other men. Before he could get the men and return to where he now stood Deveny would have taken the girl to that mysterious and unknown rendezvous in the hills in which his band had always concealed themselves, and Barbara would be lost.

Linton's lips straightened. He was to blame.

He knew the danger that would attend the action of following Deveny's men up the valley. Other men had attempted to trail them, and they had been found murdered, often with warnings upon them.

But Linton hesitated only momentarily. With a grim smile for his chances of emerging unscathed from the valley, he urged his horse up the trail, riding hard.

Several miles he had traveled, keeping the horsemen in sight, and he was beginning to believe that he would succeed where others had failed, when, passing through a clump of timber he detected movement in some brush at a little distance back.

Divining that Deveny had seen him and had sent a man into the timber to ambush him, Linton threw himself flat on the horse's mane. He felt a bullet sing past him, coming from the right, and he got his pistol out and was swinging its muzzle toward the point from which the bullet had come when a gun roared at his left.

He felt a hot, searing pain in his side, and h

reeled in the saddle from the shock. Instantly another bullet struck him, coming from the right. His pistol dropped from his weakening fingers, he toppled sidewise and tumbled limply into the dust.

Shortly afterward, seemingly while he was in a state of coma, he heard hoofbeats, rapidly growing distant.

He knew they were Deveny's men and he yielded to a vague wonder as to why they had not made sure of their work.

Doggedly, and with long and bitter effort, Linton began to turn himself so that he could get up. The pain from his wounds was excruciating, so that each muscular effort brought a retching groan from him. Yet he kept moving, twisting himself around until he got on his knees. From that position he tried a number of times to get to his feet, but he failed each time.

At last, though, with the help of a boulder that lay beside the trail, he got his feet under him and stood for an instant, staggering weakly. Then he began to move forward to his horse. When he managed at last to clutch the saddle skirt he was reeling, his knees bending under him. However, he managed to get one leg over the saddle, taking a long time to do it; and eventually he was in the seat.

He spent another long interval lashing himself to the saddle with the rope that he carried at the pommel; and then headed the horse toward the Rancho Seco.

He began to ride, urging the horse to what seemed to him a rapid pace. But he had not gone very far when he sagged against the pommel, lifelessly.

CHAPTER XXVI

ROGERS TAKES A HAND

THE trail herd had made good progress through the valley, and Rogers, aided by the Star men, had kept them going. The men feared no interference with the work, for they had terrorized the ranchers in the valley until the latter well knew the futility of retaliatory measures. Still, a certain furtive quickness of movement had always characterized the operations of the outlaws — the instinct to move secretly, if possible, and to strike swiftly when they struck was always strong in them.

Besides, the drive to Willow's Wells was not a long one, and the cattle could stand a fast pace. So it was not long after the herd had left the Star until it straggled up a defile in the hills and out upon the level where Deveny's men had to ride to take the south trail to the Rancho Seco.

The level extended southward for a distance of several miles to a grass range that the Star men knew well — for there had been times when they had grazed cattle there, making camp on their frequent trips to the Wells.

A range of low, flat hills marked the northern limits of the grazing section; and Rogers and his men trailed the cattle through the hills while the morning was still young.

The herd was through the hills, and Rogers, twist-

ing in the saddle, was taking a last look over the plain to make certain there had been no prying eyes watching the movements of himself and the men, when he saw, far to the west, a group of horsemen just coming into view at the edge of the plain — seemingly having ridden out of the big valley.

Rogers wheeled his horse and watched the horsemen as they traveled eastward, making good time. He called to a man, named Colver, who was riding close to him.

"Them's Deveny's men — from the Cache. What in blazes are they up to? Somethin's in the wind, Colver — they're ridin' like the devil was after them an' burnin' the breeze for fair!"

Rogers sent his horse scampering to the crest of one of the hills where, concealed behind some brush, he watched the progress of Deveny's men eastward.

When they passed the point on the plain where they would have to veer northward if they intended to visit the Star, he breathed with relief. For he had almost yielded to a conviction that Deveny *was* headed for the Star.

But after the horsemen passed the point that led to the Star trail, a new anxiety seized Rogers — and a passion that sent the blood to his face swept over him.

His eyes were glowing with an excitement that he could not repress when he turned to Colver.

"Somethin's up!" he snapped. "Deveny's been sullen as hell for a good many days — ever since Harlan came to the Star. One of the boys was tellin' me he heard Deveny an' Haydon havin' it out over at

the Cache. If there's goin' to be a ruckus I'm goin' to be in on it!"

He leaped his horse off the hill, racing him down into the grass plain after the other men. When he reached them he yelled sharply, and they spurred quickly to him, anticipating from his manner that danger threatened.

"I've got a hunch that hell's a-goin' to pop right sudden, boys," he told them. "An' we're goin' away from it. If there's any trouble we want to be in on it. Deveny's up to somethin'. You-all know about the agreement made between Haydon an' Harlan — that Harlan was to run the Rancho Seco without interference. Deveny's headed that way, an' Haydon ain't around. It's up to us boys to keep our eyes open.

"Harlan's at the Star. He won't be knowin' that Deveny is headin' for the Rancho Seco. Harlan's white, boys; he's done more for us guys since he's been at the Star than Haydon or Deveny ever done for us. He's promised us things that Haydon an' Deveny would never do. He's a white man, an' I'm for him. An' I'm for takin' orders from him from now on. Who's with me?"

"You're shoutin'!" declared Colver.

"It's time for a new deal," muttered another.

"You're doin' the yappin'," grimly announced a big man who was close to Rogers; "we're followin' your lead."

"I'm jumpin' for the Star then!" declared Rogers; "to put Harlan wise to where Deveny's headed for. We're leavin' the herd here until we find out what's

goin' on. Half of you guys beat it to the Rancho Seco — trailin' Deveny an' his boys, to find out what they're doin'. You're herd-ridin' them if they go to monkeyin' with the Rancho Seco. Slope!"

Rogers had hardly ceased speaking when the outfit was on the move. There were eleven men, including Rogers; and they sent their horses leaping over the crest of the hill nearest them — dividing, as they reached the level on the other side with seemingly no previous arrangement, into two groups — one group going northeastward, toward the South Trail, and the other fading into the space that yawned between it and the point where the trail to the Star led downward into the big basin.

Haydon, holding hard to the pommel of the saddle, urging his horse along the trail that led up the valley, looked back whenever he reached a rise, his eyes searching the space behind him for the dread apparition that he expected momentarily.

He knew that it would not be long before Morgan and Harlan would emerge from the ranchhouse to discover that he had escaped; and he knew, too, that they would suspect that he had gone to the Cache.

He expected they would delay riding after him, however, until they searched for him in some of the buildings, and that delay, he hoped, would give him time to reach the Cache.

He was handicapped by his useless arm — for it made riding awkward, and the numbness was stealing down his side, toward his leg. He paid little atten-

tion to the pain; indeed, he entirely forgot it in his frenzied eagerness to reach the Cache.

More prominent in his brain at this minute than any other emotion was a dread of Billy Morgan. He had yielded to terror when Morgan had revealed his identity; but the terror he had felt then had not been nearly so paralyzing as that which was now upon him.

His eyes were bulging as he rode; his lips were slavering, and he shuddered and cringed as he leaned over his horse's mane, urging him to greater effort—even though there were times when his lurches almost threw him out of the saddle.

For his previous terror had been somewhat tempered with a doubt of Morgan's veracity. Even when he had seen Morgan reaching for his pistol he had felt the doubt—had felt that Morgan was not Morgan at all, but Woodward, perpetrating a grotesque joke. To be sure, when he had seen that Morgan really intended to kill him, he had been convinced that the man was in deadly earnest. It had been then that he had desperately twisted himself so that Morgan's bullet had not touched a vital spot.

But now his terror had grown; it was a thing that had got into his soul—for he had had time to meditate over what Morgan's vengeance meant to him.

It meant that Morgan would kill him, if he caught him; that the life he treasured would be taken from him; that the magnificent body which he had always so greatly admired would be shattered and broken. The mental picture he drew further increased his terror, and he began to mutter incoherent blasphemies

as he raced his horse at a breakneck pace toward the Cache.

But when he had ridden several miles and knew from the appearance of the valley that he was nearing the Cache and that he would reach it in safety, there came a change in him.

He grew calmer; he began to feel a rage that sent the blood racing through his veins again. He looked back over the trail as often as formerly, but it was with a new expression — malevolent hatred. And when he finally reached the entrance to the Cache and rode through it, heading toward the building in which, he expected, he would find Deveny, the malevolence in his expression was mingled with triumph and cunning.

CHAPTER XXVII

A DUAL TRAGEDY

HARLAN and Morgan had made a thorough search of Haydon's desk in the latter's office in the ranchhouse, and they had found letters addressed to Haydon — received at various towns in the vicinity and proving Morgan's charges against him. And upon several of the letters were names that provided damaging evidence of the connection of influential men with the scheme to gain unlawful possession of much land in the basin.

"This cinches it!" declared Morgan as he carefully placed the letters into a pocket when he and Harlan emerged from the ranchhouse. "I reckon we've got proof now. An' the governor'll be plumb tickled."

They stepped down from the doorway and turned the corner of the house. Instantly they noted the disappearance of Haydon's body. But they did not search among the other buildings for Haydon — as he had expected them to do. For they saw that his horse was also missing.

Morgan ran for the corral, saying no word, his lips set in grim, vengeful lines. He had been a fool for not making sure that he had killed Haydon, but he would not make that mistake again. The gleam in his eyes revealed that.

Harlan, too, divined what had happened. Purgatory was in the stable — which was farther from the

ranchhouse than the corral. And though Harlan moved swiftly Morgan was already on his horse and racing toward the timber when Purgatory emerged from the stable, saddled and bridled.

Harlan noted that Morgan had not stopped to saddle his horse, and that omission revealed the man's intense desire for haste. Harlan, however, headed Purgatory into the timber, but he was more than half a mile behind Morgan when he reached the main trail.

He saw Morgan riding the trail that led up the valley, and he set out after him, giving the big black horse the rein. He divined that Morgan suspected Haydon had ridden in that direction; and while Harlan had never seen the Cache, he had heard the Star men speak of it, and he had noticed that when setting out for it they had always traveled the trail Morgan was traveling. Therefore, it was evident that Morgan thought Haydon had gone to the Cache. In that case he depended upon Deveny to assist him — if Morgan followed; and Harlan was determined to see the incident through.

He sent Purgatory ahead at a good pace, but he noted soon that Morgan was increasing the distance between them. He began to urge Purgatory forward, and gradually the distance between the two riders grew shorter.

Both were traveling rapidly, however, and it seemed to Harlan that they had not gone more than three or four miles when — watching Morgan closely, he saw him ride pell-mell into some timber that — apparently — fringed the front of a cave.

It was some time before Harlan reached the timber, and when he did he could not immediately discover the spot into which Morgan had ridden. When he did discover it he rode Purgatory through, and found himself in a narrow gorge.

He raced Purgatory through the gorge, and out of it to the sloping side of a little basin.

He saw a house near the center of the basin—and Morgan riding close to it.

The distance to the house was not great—not more than a quarter of a mile, it seemed; and Harlan felt some wonder that Morgan—who had been quite a little in advance of him—had not reached the house sooner. That mystery was explained to him almost instantly, though, when he saw that Morgan's horse was walking, going forward with a pronounced limp. Evidently Morgan had met with an accident.

Harlan was riding across the floor of the little basin, watching Morgan and wondering at the seeming absence of Deveny's men, when he saw a smoke streak issue from one of the windows of the house, saw Morgan reel in the saddle, and slide to the ground.

But before Harlan could reach the spot where Morgan had fallen, the man staggered to his feet and was running toward the house, swaying as he went.

Harlan heard a muffled report as he sent Purgatory scampering after Morgan. He saw Morgan reel again, and he knew someone in the house was using a rifle.

There was another report as Morgan lurched through an open doorway of the house. Then Har

lan knew Morgan was using his gun, for its roaring crash mingled with the whiplike crack of a rifle.

The firing had ceased when Harlan slipped off Purgatory at the open door; and both his guns were out as he leaped over the threshold.

He halted, though, standing rigid, his guns slowly swagging in his hands, their muzzles drooping.

For on the floor of the room — flat on his back near a corner — was Haydon. He was dead — there was no doubt of that.

Nor was there any doubt that the bullets Haydon had sent had finished Morgan. He was lying on his right side, his right arm under him, extended; the palm of the hand upward, the fingers limply holding the pistol he had used, some smoke curling lazily from the muzzle.

Harlan knelt beside Morgan, examining him for signs of life. He got up a little later and stood for some time looking down at the man, thinking of Barbara. Twice had tragedy cast its sinister shadow over her.

CHAPTER XXVIII

CONVERGING TRAILS

AN HOUR or so later, Harlan, having finished his labors in a clearing at the edge of the level near the gorge, climbed slowly on Purgatory and sent him back down the valley trail toward the Star.

From the first his sympathies for Barbara had been deep, beginning on the evening Lane Morgan had mentioned her in his presence — when the man seemed to see her in that strange, awesome moment before his death — when he had seemed to hold out his arms to her. Later, at Lamo, when Harlan had held the girl in his arms, he felt that at that instant he must have experienced much the same protective impulse that Morgan would have felt, had the experience occurred to him. Harlan had been slightly cynical until that minute; but since then he had known that his rage against the outlaws was deeply personal.

That rage, though, had centered most heavily upon Deveny. He had hated Haydon, too — from the first. In the beginning it had been a jealous hatred, aroused over the conviction that Barbara loved the man. But later — when he had discovered that Haydon was the mysterious "Chief," that he was the real murderer of Lane Morgan, and that behind his professed love for the girl was meditated trickery — his hatred had become a passion in which Barbara did not figure.

His hatred for Haydon, though, could not be compared with the passionate contempt and loathing he felt for Deveny. The man had attempted, in Lamo, a thing that Harlan had always abhorred, and the memory of that time was still vivid in Harlan's brain.

Into Harlan's heart as he rode toward the Star flamed that ancient loathing, paling his face and bringing a gleam to his eyes that had been in them often of late—a lust for the lives of the men whose evil deeds and sinister influence had kept Barbara a virtual prisoner at the Rancho Seco.

He rode the valley trail slowly, his thoughts upon Barbara, his lips straightening when he thought of how he would have to return to the Rancho Seco, some day, to tell her of her brother's death. Twice had tragedy visited her, and again he would be the messenger to bring her the grim news.

When he reached the Star he rode up to the corral fence and dismounted. He stood for a long time at the fence, his elbows on one of the rails, his thoughts dwelling upon Barbara. Pity for her whitened his face, set his lips in rigid lines.

She had been in danger, but it seemed to him that it would soon be over. For Haydon would bother the girl no more, and as soon as he could meet Deveny he would remove another menace to Barbara's life and happiness.

He had no regrets for the men he had killed; they deserved what he had given them. As he had told Morgan, he had considered himself merely an instrument of the law of right and justice—which law

was based upon the very principle that governed men in civilized communities.

He was facing south, and he raised his head after a few minutes, for upon the slight breeze was borne to him the rapid drumming of hoofs. As he looked up he saw, far out toward the southern edge of the valley, a dust cloud, moving swiftly toward him.

At first he suspected that the men in the group belonged to Deveny, and he drew out his pistols, one after the other, and examined them — for he decided — if Deveny was among the men — to settle for good the question of power and authority that Haydon had raised.

When the men came closer, though, swooping toward the ranchhouse like feathers before a hurricane, he saw that Rogers was among them.

Then, as the men came toward him down along the corral fence, Harlan saw that Rogers' eyes were wide with excitement. And he stood, his face darkening, as Rogers told him what he had seen, and voiced his suspicions.

"We're with you, Harlan," declared Rogers, sweeping a hand toward the men; "an' them other boys which have trailed Deveny, are with you. We're out to 'get' Deveny if you say the word; and that thief, Haydon, too."

Harlan did not answer. He grinned at the men, though, and at Rogers — acknowledging his gratitude for their decision to be "with" him; then he turned, leaped on Purgatory, and sent the big beast thundering toward the timber that led to the main trail.

Their voices silent, their horses falling quickly into the pace set by the big black, Rogers and the other men followed.

The other half of Rogers' men, headed by Colver, were several miles behind Deveny's horsemen when they reached the South Trail. They gained very little on the other men, though, for Deveny and his men were just then racing Barbara to the point where the trails converged, having seen her. But during Deveny's halt at the covert, where he had shot Stroud, Colver's men gained, and they were not more than two or three miles from the covert when Deveny's men left it.

From the shelving trail, ever sweeping toward the trail in the valley, Colver had noted the halt at the covert, though he had not seen Barbara, nor Stroud. He had seen, of course, that Deveny had not gone to the Rancho Seco, that for some reason or other he had swerved, taking the trail up the valley.

Colver was puzzled, but he remembered Rogers' orders, and when he and his men reached the covert, they halted. They came upon Stroud, lying near some bushes, and they saw his horse, grazing on the tall grass near by. They had reached the covert too late to see Barbara's pony; and when they remounted, after taking a look at Stroud, they caught a glimpse of a lone horseman racing up the valley in the direction taken by Deveny and his men.

The lone horseman was Red Linton, though Colver did not know it, for the South Trail dipped into the basin miles before it emerged to the level at the

point of convergence with the other trail, and Colver had not seen Linton when he had passed.

Colver and his men fled up the valley, following the trail taken by Deveny and the lone horseman, and when they had gone two or three miles they saw a rider coming toward them. They raced toward him, for they saw he was in trouble; that he had lashed himself to the pommel of the saddle, and that he was leaning far over it, limp and inert.

Linton was not unconscious, but he was very near it; so near that he seemed to dream that men were around him and that voices were directed at him.

Into his mind as he straightened and looked at the men finally came the conviction that this was not a dream; and after an instant of intense effort, during which he fixed his gaze on Colver, he recognized the other.

He laughed, grimly, mockingly:

"Front an' rear—eh?" he said. "You got me, goin' an' comin'. Well, go to it—I deserve it, for lettin' Barbara out of my sight. If you don't kill me, Harlan will. But if you guys are *men,* you won't let Deveny——"

"Deveny's got Barbara Morgan?"

This was Colver. Something in his voice straightened Linton further, and he steadied himself in the saddle and looked fairly at the man.

"Deveny's got her. An' they got me—chasin' 'em. I was headin' back to the Rancho Seco, to get the T Down boys—all Harlan's friends—to wipe Deveny out. If you guys are *men*——"

Sheer will could no longer support Linton's failing muscles — and he again collapsed over the pommel.

For an instant only did Colver hesitate. Then he turned to a lean rider who bestrode a tall, rangy horse. He spoke sharply to the rider:

"Hit the breeze to the Rancho Seco, an' get them T Down boys. Fan it, damn you!"

The rider was off with the word, leaping his horse down the trail with dizzying speed. Then Colver loosed the rope that held Linton to the saddle, and with the help of the other men lifted the man down and stretched him in a plot of grass beside the trail, where they worked over him until they saw, far out on the level toward the Rancho Seco, a number of horsemen coming, seemingly abreast, as though they were racing, each man trying his best to outstrip the others.

CHAPTER XXIX

WORLD'S END

BARBARA MORGAN had fought Deveny until she became exhausted. Thereafter she lay quiet, breathing fast, yielding to the nameless terror that held her in its icy clutch.

The appearance of Deveny so soon after the end of the heartbreaking ride down the trail had brought into her heart a sense of the futility of resistance—and yet she had resisted, involuntarily, instinctively. Yet resistance had merely served to increase the exhaustion that had come upon her.

She had not known—until she lay passive in Deveny's arms—how taut her nerves had been, nor how the physical ordeal had drained her strength.

She felt the strain, now, but consideration for her body was overwhelmed by what she saw in Deveny's eyes as she lay watching him.

There were a dozen men with Deveny—she had seen them, counted them when they had been racing down the shelving trail on the other side of the valley. And she knew they were following Deveny, for she could hear the thudding of hoofs behind.

Deveny's big arms were around her; she could feel the rippling of his muscles as he swayed from side to side, balancing himself in the saddle. He was not using the reins; he was giving his attention to her, letting the horse follow his own inclinations.

Yet she noted that the animal held to the trail, that he traveled steadily, requiring no word from his rider.

Once, after they had ridden some distance up the valley, Barbara heard a man behind them call Deveny's attention to some horsemen who were riding the shelving trail that Deveny and his men had taken on their way to the level; and she heard Deveny laugh.

"Some of the Star gang, I reckon. Mebbe Haydon, goin' to the Rancho Seco, to see his girl." He grinned down into Barbara's face, his own alight with a triumph that made a shiver run over her.

Later—only a few minutes, it seemed—she heard a man call to Deveny again, telling him that a lone rider was "fannin' it" up the valley.

"Looks like that guy, Linton," said the man.

"Two of you drop back and lay for him!" ordered Deveny. "Make it sure!" he added, after a short pause.

Barbara yielded to a quick horror. She fought with Deveny, trying in vain to free her arms—which he held tightly to her sides with his own. She gave it up at last, and lay, looking up into his face, her eyes blazing with impotent rage and repugnance.

"You mean to kill him?" she charged.

"Sure," he laughed; "there's no one interfering with what's going on now."

Overcome with nausea over the conviction that Deveny's order meant death to Red Linton, Barbara lay slack in Deveny's arms for a long time. A premonitory silence had settled over the valley; she heard

the dull thud of hoofs behind her, regular and swift, the creaking of the saddle leather as the animal under her loped forward.

There was no other sound. For the men behind her were strangely silent, and even Deveny seemed to be listening.

After what seemed to be a long interval, she heard a shot, and then almost instantly, another. She shuddered, closing her eyes, for she knew they had killed Linton. And she had blamed Linton for guarding her from — from the very thing that had happened to her. And Linton had given his life for her!

How long she had her eyes closed she did not know. The time could not have been more than a few minutes though, for she heard a voice behind her saying to Deveny:

"They got him."

Then she looked up, to see Deveny grinning at her.

"I reckon that's all," he said. "We're headin' for the Cache — my hang-out. If you'd have been good over in Lamo, the day that damned Harlan came, this wouldn't have happened. I'd sent for a parson, an' I intended to give you a square deal. But now it's different. Then I was scared of running foul of Haydon — I didn't want to make trouble. But I'm running my own game now — Haydon and me have agreed to call it quits. Me not liking the idea of Haydon adopting Harlan."

She stared up at him, her eyes widening.

"You and Haydon were — what do you mean?" she asked, her heart seeming to be a dead weight in

her breast, heavy with suspicion over the dread significance in his voice and words. She watched him, breathlessly.

"I'm meaning that Haydon and me were running things in the valley — that we were partners, splitting equal. But I'm playing a lone hand now."

He seemed to enjoy her astonishment — the light in her eyes which showed that comprehension, freighted with hopelessness, was stealing over her.

He grinned hugely as he watched her face.

"Haydon is the guy we called 'Chief,'" he said, enjoying her further amazement and noting the sudden paleness that swept over her face. "He's the guy who killed your father at Sentinel Rock. He was after you, meaning to make a fool of you. Hurts — does it?" he jeered, when he saw her eyes glow with a rage that he could understand. "I've heard of that chain deal — Haydon was telling me. When he shot your father he lost a bit of chain. Harlan found it and gave it back to him, with you looking on. I reckon that's why him and Harlan hit it off together so well — Harlan knowing he killed your father and not telling you about it."

The long shudder that shook the girl betrayed something of the terrible emotion under which she was laboring; and when she finally opened her eyes to gaze again into Deveny's, they were filled with a haunting hopelessness — a complete surrender to the sinister circumstances which seemed to have surrounded her from the beginning.

"Harlan," she said weakly, as though upon him

she had pinned her last hope; "Harlan has joined you after all—he is against me—too?"

"Him and Haydon are after the Rancho Seco. Harlan's been playing with Haydon right along."

Barbara said nothing more. She was incapable of coherent thought or of definite action—or even of knowledge of her surroundings.

For it seemed to her that Deveny had spoken truthfully. She had seen the incident of the broken chain; she had seen Harlan's hypocritical grin upon that occasion—how he had seemed to be eager to ingratiate himself with Haydon.

All were against her—everybody. Everybody, it seemed, but Red Linton. And they had killed Linton.

She seemed to be drifting off into a place which was peopled with demons that schemed and planned for her honor and her life; and not one of them who planned and schemed against her gave the slightest indication of mercy or manliness. The world became chaotic with swirling objects—then a blank, aching void into which she drifted, feeling nothing, seeing nothing.

CHAPTER XXX

THE ULTIMATE TREACHERY

WHEN Barbara regained consciousness she was lying in some long, dusty grass beside the trail where she seemed to have been thrown, or where she had fallen. For she was lying on her right side, her right arm doubled under her, and she felt a pain in her shoulder which must have been where she had struck when she had fallen.

She twisted around and sat up, bewildered, almost succumbing to the hideous terror which instantly gripped her when she remembered what had happened.

Deveny's horse stood near her, nipping the tips of the grass that grew at her feet. Beyond the animal—a little to her right, and perhaps fifty feet from her—were other horses, with riders.

As she staggered to her feet she recognized the men who had been with Deveny. They were on their horses—all facing away from her. Facing Deveny's men were all the T Down boys—she recognized them instantly. Pistols glittered in their hands; they seemed to be in the grip of some strong passion, which wreathed their faces into grim, bitter lines.

Near the T Down men—flanking them—were other men. Among them she saw faces she knew—Colver, Strom Rogers, and others.

There must have been twenty-five or thirty men, altogether, and they were all on a little level beside

the trail. It seemed to Barbara that they all appeared to have forgotten her; seemed not to know that she was in the vicinity.

She saw Deveny standing on the little level. His profile was toward her; there was a wild, savage glare in his eyes.

Not more than a dozen feet from him was Harlan.

She saw Harlan's face from the side also. There was a grin on his lips—bitter, mirthless, terrible.

She stood for what seemed to her a long time, watching all of them; her heart throbbing with a dread heaviness that threatened to choke her; her body in a state of icy paralysis.

She thought she knew what had happened, for it seemed to her that everything in the world—all the passions and the desires of men—centered upon her. She felt that there were two factions—one headed by Deveny, and the other by Harlan, representing Haydon—and that they were about to fight for her. The T Down men seemed to be standing with Harlan—as, of course, they would, since he had sent for them to come to the Rancho Seco.

Oddly, though, they apparently seemed to pay no attention to her; not one of them looked at her.

If they were to fight it made no difference to her which faction won, for her fate would be the same, if she stayed.

She did not know what put the thought into her mind, but as she stood there watching the men she repeated mentally over and over the words: "If I stay."

Why should she stay? She answered the question by stealing toward Deveny's horse. When she reached the animal she paused, glancing apprehensively at the men, her breathing suspended — hoping, dreading, her nerves and muscles taut. It seemed they must see her.

Not a man moved as she climbed upon the back of the horse; it seemed to her as she urged the animal gently and slowly away from the men that they heard nothing and saw nothing but Harlan and Deveny, and that Harlan and Deveny saw nothing but each other.

She sent the horse away, walking him for a dozen yards or more, until he crossed the little level and sank into a shallow depression in the trail. Still looking back, she saw that none of the men had changed position — that they seemed to be more intent upon Harlan and Deveny. And she could hear Harlan's voice, now, low, husky.

She urged the horse into a lope; and when she had ridden perhaps a hundred yards, the conviction that she would escape grew strong in her. Once out of the valley she would ride straight to Lamo, to ask Sheriff Gage to protect her.

She rode faster as she widened the distance that separated her from the men; and soon the horse was covering the trail rapidly; and she leaned forward in the saddle, praying that the men might not see her.

She had gone several miles when she noticed a dark object beside the trail ahead of her. She drew the horse down and approached the spot cautiously. And when she saw that the object was a man, her thoughts

flew to the shot she had heard, and to Deveny's words:

"Make sure of it."

It *was* Linton, she saw, as she halted the horse near the object she had seen. He was lying on his right side, resting his weight on an elbow, as though trying to rise.

In an instant she was out of the saddle and at his side, raising his head.

He looked at her, smiled, and said weakly:

"You got away, eh? I reckon they met Harlan. I was hopin' they would. Did they?"

"Yes," she answered quickly. She had seen that Linton was badly wounded, and she knew that she must give up hope of getting to Lamo in order to give him the care he needed.

So without speaking further, though with an effort that required the last ounce of her strength, she lifted Linton, he helping a little, and led him toward her horse. Somehow, with Linton doing all he could, she got him into the saddle, climbed up behind him, and sent the horse toward the Rancho Seco.

Back at the little level where the men were grouped there was a tension that seemed to charge the atmosphere with tragedy. Deveny's men sat silent in their saddles, watching their leader and Harlan with sullen, savage eyes. The T Down men, facing them, were equally sullen. Guns in hand, they alertly watched the men who were with Deveny, plainly determined that there should be no interference from them in the tragedy that seemed imminent.

Rogers and his men, and the riders who had come with Colver, were also watching the Deveny group. All of these held weapons, too; and Rogers, who had dismounted, was standing beside his horse, a rifle resting on the saddle seat, his cheek snuggling the stock, the muzzle trained on Deveny.

Harlan, Rogers, and the others, racing down the valley, had met Deveny and his men coming up. And when Deveny had recognized Harlan and the others he had quickly dismounted, bearing his unconscious burden. Because he felt that trouble would result from the meeting, Deveny had thrown Barbara from him.

He had instantly forgotten the girl. For when Harlan came up Deveny saw a gleam in his eyes that sent his brain to throbbing with those unmistakable impulses of fear which had seized him the day, in Lamo, when Harlan had faced him.

There had been a moment of silence when the two groups met; a stiffening of muscles and the heavy, strained breathing that, in men, tells of mental preparation for violence, swift and deadly.

It had been Harlan who had prevented concerted action — action that would have brought about a battle in which all would have figured. His guns came out before the thought of trouble could definitely form in the brains of the Deveny men; and he had held them — the men in the saddles, Deveny standing — until the T Down men, whom he had seen from a distance, coming toward him, could arrive.

Then, still menacing the Deveny men with weapons,

he had dismounted to face Deveny — where he had been when Barbara Morgan had recovered consciousness.

And while the girl had been stealing away he had been talking to Deveny, though loud enough for all of them to hear.

There was about Harlan as this moment a threat that brought awe into the hearts of Deveny's men — a cold, savage alertness that told them, unmistakably, that the man's rage was at a pitch where the slightest movement by any of them would precipitate that action for which, plainly, Harlan longed.

"So you got Barbara Morgan?" he said as he stood close to Deveny. There was a taunt in his voice, and an irony that made Deveny squirm with fury.

And yet Deveny fought hard for composure. He could see in Harlan's manner something akin to what he had seen that day, in Lamo, when Harlan had baited him. His manner was the same, yet somehow it was not the same. There was this difference:

In Lamo, Harlan had betrayed the threat of violence that Deveny had felt. But he had seemed to be composed, saturnine — willing to wait. It had seemed, then, that he wanted trouble, but he would not force it.

Now, he plainly intended to bring a clash quickly. The determination was in his eyes, in the set of his head, and in his straight, stiff lips.

He seemed to have forgotten the other men; his gaze was on Deveny with a boring intensity that sent a chill of stealthy dread over the outlaw.

Deveny had faced many men in whose hearts lurked the lust to kill; he had shot down men who had faced him with that lust in their eyes — and he knew the passion when he saw it.

He saw it now, in Harlan's eyes — they were wanton — in them was concentrated all the hate and contempt that Harlan felt for him. But back of it all was that iron self-control that Deveny had seen in the man when he had faced him in Lamo.

Deveny had avoided Harlan since that day. He had known why — and he knew at this minute. It was because he was afraid of Harlan — he feared him as a coward fears the death that confronts him. The sensation was premonitory. Nor was it that. It *had* been premonitory — it was now a conviction. In the time, in Lamo, when he had faced Harlan some prescience had warned him that before him was the man whom the fates had selected to bring death to him.

He had felt it during all the days of Harlan's presence in the section; he had felt it, and he had avoided the man. He felt it now, and his breathing grew fast and difficult — his chest laboring as he shrilled breath into his lungs.

He knew what was coming; he knew that presently Harlan's passion would reach the point where action would be imperative; that presently would come that slow, halting movement of Harlan's hands toward his gun — which gun? He would witness, with himself as one of the chief actors, the hesitating movement which had brought fame of a dread kind to the man who stood before him.

Could he beat Harlan to the "draw?" Could he? That question was dinned into his ears and into his consciousness by his brain and his heart. He heard nothing of what was going on around him; he did not hear Harlan's voice, though he saw the man's lips moving. He did not see any of the men who stood near, nor did he see his men, sitting in their saddles, watching him.

He saw nothing but Harlan; felt nothing except the blood that throbbed in his temples; was conscious of nothing but the question that filled his heart, his brain, and his soul—could he beat Harlan to the "draw?"

Presently, when he saw, with astonishment, that Harlan was slowly backing away from him, crouching a little, he divined vaguely that the moment had come. And now, curiously, he heard Harlan's voice—low, distinct, even. What an iceberg the man was!

"Haydon's dead," he heard Harlan saying—and he stared at Harlan, finding it difficult to comprehend. "Lafe Woodward killed him," Harlan went on "killed him at the Cache. Now get this straight—all of you." It seemed strange to Deveny that Harlan seemed to be speaking to the men, while watching him, only.

"Woodward was killed, too. His real name was Bill Morgan. He was Lane Morgan's son. Bill Morgan was sent here by the governor, to get evidence against Haydon. He got it. I took it from his pockets when I planted him—an' it's goin' straight to the governor.

"You guys are through here—" again he seemed

to speak to all the men. "Morgan told me he had some men with the Cache gang. They're to ride out an' join my boys — the T Down outfit."

Deveny was conscious that several men detached themselves from the group of riders he had brought with him, and rode to where the T Down men were standing. Then Harlan spoke again:

"Now, she shapes up like this. If there's any of the Star gang wantin' to go straight, they can throw in with the T Down boys, too. If there's some that figure on pullin' their freight out of the valley — an' stayin' out — they can hit the breeze right now — drivin' that Star herd to Willow's Wells, sellin' them, an' dividin' the money. Whoever is takin' up that proposition is startin' right now!"

About half the Star men began to move; heading up the valley. There was a momentary pause, and then those that were left of Deveny's men moved uneasily.

"Does that go for us guys too?"

"It's wide open," announced Harlan, cold humor seeming to creep into his voice. "It's your chance to get out of this deal without gettin' what's comin' to you."

There was a rush and clatter as Deveny's men joined the men of the Star, who were already on the move. And then there followed a long silence, during which Deveny glanced up the valley and saw the men riding away.

He turned again, to face Harlan, with the consciousness that he stood alone. The T Down men, half of

the Star men, and a large proportion of the Cache men were standing with Harlan. Deveny saw Colver and Rogers among those who had aligned themselves with Harlan.

No invitation to withdraw had been extended to Deveny. The knowledge strengthened his conviction that Harlan intended to kill him. And yet, now, facing Harlan, he knew that he would never take up the slender thread of chance that was offered him—to draw his gun, kill Harlan and resume his authority over the men who were left.

The possibility, dangling at the other end of the slender thread of chance, did not allure him. For he knew he could not draw the pistol at his hip with Harlan's gaze upon him—that would be suicide.

"Deveny!"

Harlan's voice, snapping with menace roused him, straightened him, brought an ashen pallor to his face.

"It's your turn, Deveny. You stay here. Flash your gun!"

Here it was—the dreaded moment. Deveny saw the men around him stiffen rigidly; he heard their slow-drawn breaths. The thought to draw his gun was strong in him, and he fought hard to force his recreant muscles to do the will of his mind. For an instant he stood, his right hand poised above the holster of his pistol, the elbow crooked, ready to straighten.

And then, with the steady, coldly flaming eyes of Harlan upon him, Harlan's right hand extended slightly, the fingers spread a little as though he was

about to offer his hand to the other. Deveny became aware that he was doing an astonishing thing. He was raising his right hand!

Already it was at his shoulder. And as he marveled, it went higher, finally coming to a level with his head, where it stopped. He had publicly advertised his refusal to settle his differences with Harlan with the pistol.

"Yellow!"

It was Harlan's voice. "You won't fight an' you won't run. Well, we'll keep you, savin' you for the governor. I reckon he'll be glad to see you."

Harlan turned, sheathing his pistol, and began to walk toward his horse, his back toward Deveny.

Then Deveny acted. His eyes flaming hate, he drew his pistol with a flashing movement, his face hideous with malignant passion.

He sent one bullet into Harlan's back and two more as Harlan tumbled forward, sinking to his knees from the shock. But Deveny's two last bullets went wild, tearing up the grass of the level as the gun loosened in his hand.

For Rogers' rifle was spitting fire and smoke with venomous rapidity, and Deveny was sinking, his knees doubling under him, his body shuddering with the impact of each bullet.

CHAPTER XXXI

PEACE — AND A SUNSET

RED LINTON had recovered — there was no doubt of that. For Linton, though a trifle pale, was vigorous. Vigor was in the look of him as he stood, a slow grin on his face, beside Barbara Morgan at the entrance of the *patio* of the Rancho Seco ranch-house.

Barbara was sitting on a bench that ranged the front wall of the building. She was arrayed in a dress of some soft, fluffy material, in which she made a picture that brought a breathless longing into Linton's heart — a longing which made him feel strangely tender and sympathetic.

But Barbara was not smiling. There was a wistfulness in her eyes that made Linton gulp with jealous thoughts that came to him.

"He don't deserve it, the durned scalawag!"

"Deserve what?" questioned Barbara.

"You," muttered Linton, with an embarrassed grin. "Shucks, I wasn't thinkin' I was talkin' out loud. I'm sure gettin' locoed."

"Who doesn't deserve me?" asked Barbara.

"Harlan!" declared Linton, with a subtle glance at the girl. "He ain't in no ways fit to be thinkin' serious thoughts about a girl like you."

"Has he been thinking serious thoughts?" He

eyes dropped from Linton's and the latter grinned widely.

"Thinkin' them! He's been talkin' them. Talked them all the time him an' me was stretched out in the big room, gettin' over our scratches. That man is plumb locoed. I couldn't get him to talk nothin' else. When I told him about the governor sendin' him congratulations, an' offerin' to do somethin' handsome for him, he says: 'You say she ain't worryin' none about things? Red, do you think she'd hook up with a guy like me—that's got a bad reputation?'"

Linton shot a side glance at Barbara and saw a flush steal into her cheeks. He concealed a broad grin with the palm of his hand and then said, gruffly:

"I answers him as such a impertinent question ought to be answered. Says I—'Harlan, you're a damned fool!'—askin' your pardon, ma'am. A girl like Barbara Morgan ain't goin' to throw herself away on a no-good outlaw. Not none! Why, ma'am, he's an outlaw at heart as well as by reputation. He's clean bad—there ain't a bit of good in him. Didn't he go to Haydon deliberate? An' didn't he keep you in suspense about what was goin' on—not tellin' you anything until he had to? Shucks!"

"But there was a method in that, Linton," said Barbara; "he told me he was afraid I'd unconsciously betray him, and then he could not have done what he did."

Linton grinned again—again concealing the grin.

"You don't mean to say that you believe the cuss done the best he could?"

"I think I do, Linton."

"Shucks. Women is odd that way, ain't they? You ain't tellin' me that you think he's on the level—that his reputation ain't as bad as some folks make believe it is, an' that he's *square?"*

"I believe he's square, Linton!" the girl answered, firmly.

Linton was silent for an instant, during which he stood on one foot, looking westward where the sun was swimming low above the big valley.

"Ma'am," he said lowly, breaking the silence: "I'm damned if I ain't beginnin' to believe it, myself. There's some things that seem to prove it.

"First, there's him takin' your part over in Lamo. Then there's him comin' here with you, knowin' you was alone—an' not botherin' you. Then he guarded you right steady, not lettin' Haydon or Deveny run in on you. Then he makes me foreman—which seems to prove that he's got sense. Then he goes up the valley an' helps your brother bust up the outlaw gang, riskin' his life a lot.

"An' all the time he knows where your dad hid that gold. But he didn't touch it until he got over that scratch Deveny give him—or until he could take you where it was hid an' show you he hadn't touched it. Yes, ma'am," he added with a hyprocritical grin—which he did not permit the girl to see—"I'm beginnin' to believe the cuss is on the level."

"Oh, he *is,* Linton!" said Barbara, in a low, earnest voice.

Again there was a silence. Then——

"Do you think he's a pretty good looker, ma'am?"

"I think he is handsome!" Again the girl blushed.

And again Linton grinned. He cleared his throat before he again spoke:

"Well," he drawled; "mebbe I wouldn't go that far. Mostly I don't care for a handsome man, anyway. I wouldn't say he's ugly, an' I won't say he's handsome. I'd light on a spot about halfway between them two extremes. I'd say he ain't a bad looker. That would be about right."

"He *is* handsome, Linton!"

"Well, likely he is—to a woman. I've heard that there's *been* women which thought him a heap good lookin'."

"Where, Linton?" she asked, quickly.

"Why, in Pardo, ma'am. There was a biscuit shooter in a eatin'-house there that was sure wild about Harlan—she followed him around a heap."

"He didn't have anything to do with her, Linton?" she questioned, stiffening.

"Shucks! Not him. Women never bothered him none. He always fought shy of them—until now. He's changed a lot. I don't understand him no more. Keeps a-moonin' regular about you. I'm gettin' a heap sick of hangin' around him. Ain't you?"

"No!"

"Well, that's a heap odd, ma'am. I was thinkin' you didn't like him a heap. Accordin' to that, I reckon you'd be right glad to see him—comin' home from Pardo—where's he been to have that gold assayed?"

"He ought to be here before dark, Linton. And I shall be glad to see him."

"Hopin' the gold will assay good, I reckon?"

"Hoping he will come back, safe."

"You don't care about the gold?"

"No."

"Only about him?"

"Yes, Linton," she said, gently.

"Well, that's odd, ma'am," drawled Linton.

"What is?"

"That I feel the same way about the cuss."

She looked keenly at him, saw the dancing, wayward gleam in his eyes, and gave him a reproachful glance.

"You've been pumping me, Linton," she charged.

"Well," he defended; "he's my friend. ma'am; an' I was sure worried, thinkin' you wouldn't take him—if he offered himself."

She smiled, wisely.

"He did that long ago, Linton—right after he—well, the day he got up, after the doctor told him he could."

"That he could offer himself?"

"That he could get up. Linton," she said, severely; "you want to know too much."

Linton did not answer. He took her by an arm raised her to her feet, and turned her face toward the northeast—where a rider came, not more than two or three miles distant.

Linton left her to stand there, while he made his way into one of the bunkhouses, where, with an appearance of unconcern that he did not feel, he watched the

coming rider. And when he saw the rider head his horse straight for the gate of the *patio,* Linton grinned widely and sought some of the other men in the cookhouse.

The sun was between the two huge mountains at the western end of the big valley when Harlan dismounted at the *patio* gate and dropped, tired and dusty, to the bench upon which Barbara sat. Had Linton seen what occurred when Harlan dismounted he would have ceased to speculate over certain phases of the relations between the man and the girl.

Barbara did not seem to mind the dust on Harlan's sleeve, nor did she feel it on his shoulder where her head was nestling.

For both were looking out into the big valley, where the sun was sinking with a splendor that reminded them of another day.

"The gold isn't worth mining," said Harlan, gently. "The assayer used names that didn't mean anything to me, but he told me enough in plain talk, to prove that your dad wasted his time."

"I'm satisfied," said the girl.

"Me too," smiled Harlan. "There's somethin' better than gold."

"It's peace—and happiness," said Barbara, gently.

"An' a girl," smiled Harlan.

"And a man," declared Barbara stoutly.

"Well, then," he conceded, "we won't quarrel. We'll say it's both."

And they sat, saying little, watching the colors of the sunset flame over the mighty valley—stealing over

the vast, silent space that spread between the two mountain ranges. And the big valley smiled back at them, softening the sadness that dwelt in the heart of the girl, and holding out to both of them a promise of good to come — telling them of a mystery that had been solved, and of a menace removed.

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